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Working towards Parent-School Partnership: An Action

Research Project in an Urban Primary School

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by

Mary Anne Healy

N.T., B.A., M.Ed.

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Dedicated to my parents, Con and Gobnait Healy

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CMRS	Conference of Major Religious Superiors
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science
HSCL	Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme
HSEP	Home School Employment Partnership
IEP	Individual Educational Plan
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
LEA	Local Education Authority
SCP	School Completion Programme
SDPS	School Development Planning Support Service
SERC	Report of the Special Education Review Committee
SSP	School Support Programme
TED	Targeting Educational Disadvantage Project
UCC	University College, Cork
WSE	Whole School Evaluation

ABSTRACT

This dissertation describes an action research project undertaken in an urban primary school. This action research project aimed to improve partnership with parents in the school, including parents whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage.

The dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter One provides a rationale for parent-school partnership and describes the school in which the action research project takes place. In Chapter Two, parents' role in educational disadvantage is explored, the history of parental partnership in Irish education is traced, a conceptual framework for parent-school partnership is outlined and Irish and international research on partnership between parents and schools is presented. Chapter Three describes the action research process. Pre-action findings, consisting of a shared parental understanding of parent-school partnership, are provided in Chapter Four. Action implemented by parents of children in Junior Infants (the first year of primary school) and parents of children in Second Class (the fourth year of primary school), together with an evaluation of that action, is described in Chapter Five. Chapter Six contains interviews with parents whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage, as well as action undertaken by these parents and an evaluation of that action. In Chapter Seven, the research questions are answered, recommendations are made and areas warranting future investigation are identified.

Amongst the main findings of this dissertation are the following: Parental understandings of partnership fell under a number of broad headings of which the most important are: communication, co-operation, parental school involvement and home and school listening to each other with respect. The cyclical nature of the action research facilitated the development of parental action in this project. The action research process highlighted the fact that some parents need greater support than others and that parental involvement needs to be differentiated to include all parents.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Foreword

This research explores the concept of parent-school partnership in an Irish primary school. The chosen research methodology is action research. The aim of the project undertaken for the action research is threefold. First, it aims to answer the question, 'What is parent-school partnership?'. Second, the project aims to increase parent-school partnership in an urban primary school. Third, it aims to establish how parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage can be involved in parent-school partnership.

It is hoped that this study will make a contribution to the research already available on the area of parent-school partnership by adding to the understanding of partnership in the parent-school context, by identifying strategies for primary schools endeavouring to implement this partnership and by offering an insight into how parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage can be involved in parent-school partnership.

This first chapter will set the action research project in context. The constitutional and legal underpinnings of parent-school partnership will be outlined and the significance of the aims of the project will be discussed. Possible barriers to partnership will be identified. The role of the present author and a description of the school in which the project is set will be provided as well as an account of initiatives in place in this school under the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Action Plan for Educational

Inclusion (Department of Education and Science 2005). Definitions of the key terms used in the dissertation will be presented. The research questions will be stated at the end of the chapter.

1.2 <u>Constitutional and legal underpinnings of parent-school partnership</u>

Parental involvement in formal education has been an important aspiration in educational thought and policy in Ireland and other countries in the developed world, particularly over the last three decades. Indeed, the right and duty of parents as the primary educators of their children are enshrined in the Irish Constitution. Article 42.1 states that parents have the inalienable right and duty 'to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.'

The importance of parents in education is acknowledged by the 1995 Irish Government White Paper on Education (Department of Education 1995, 139), as follows:

> By the time the child enters school, the home has made a contribution to her/his development which will significantly affect the child's subsequent performance in the school.

The White Paper goes on to assert that parents are integral partners in the education of their children. It states that the parents' role confers on them the right to active participation in the education of their children. This includes, according to the document, their right as individuals to be consulted and informed on all aspects of their child's education at school level and their right as a group to actively participate in the education system at school and at

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national level. The position of parents is enshrined in law by the Education Act, 1998. This Act underlines the accountability of the education system to parents and lays down clear directives for teachers, principals and Boards of Management in their dealings with parents. For instance, a school must 'ensure that parents of a student … have access in the prescribed manner to records kept by that school relating to the progress of that student in his or her education' (Government of Ireland 1998, Article 9g). With regard to parents' associations, the Act states that 'the parents of students of a recognized school may establish … a parents' association for that school and membership of that association shall be open to all parents of students of that school' (Article 26:1). Furthermore, 'the board shall promote contact between the school, parents of students in that school and the community' (Article 26: 3). The Act states that the education system should be 'conducted in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff, the community served by the school and the state' (Long Title). Later in this dissertation, it will be demonstrated that, historically, parents were assigned a peripheral role by schools. It could thus be argued that the role of parents in education is emphasized by the White Paper and the Education Act, 1998 for this very reason, viz., that, heretofore, this role had not been recognized by schools. Steele (1999, 136) makes the point that the Education Act, 1998 'does little more than afford statutory recognition to rights already possessed and exercised by parents' and states that there is 'little doubt' that 'the Act is not as radical as similar instruments in other European jurisdictions.'

1.3 <u>Significance of aims</u>

In seeking to state the significance of the aims, Wolfendale's (1999) rationale for a partnership model will be used as a framework. Wolfendale's rationale rests on *moral*, *educational* and *economic* imperatives (Wolfendale 1999, 53).

1.3.1 Moral significance of parent-school partnership

When we speak of acting morally, we are referring to doing what is right. Inherent in any mention of morality, is the notion of values. MacGiolla Phádraig (2005, 94) views partnership with parents as 'a value in itself.' Prendergast (2003, 109) sees partnership as a values based concept, describing it as 'an inspiring and transforming ideal that brings into play a set of fundamental values relating to people and to the culture of their institutions.' Prendergast (2003, 109) believes that the partnership ideal proposes three core values, as follows:

> The first of these is a profound respect for persons, expressed as a mutual attitude. The second value proposes a determination on the part of those who manage the contexts of human interaction to be inclusive of all persons in the dynamics of that interaction. The third value heralds the intention to underline the interdependence of people in human flourishing.

Apart from the concepts of respect, inclusiveness and interdependence, there is a moral duty on schools to implement partnership because, quite simply, parents have a right to partnership. This right is legally underpinned by the Education Act, 1998 and unambiguously spelled out by the Irish Government White Paper on Education (Government of Ireland 1995). The moral duty regarding partnership in education does not end with the school but also embraces parents who 'should nurture a learning environment, co-operate with

and support the school and other educational partners, and fulfil their special role in the development of the child' (Government of Ireland 1995, 9). Indeed, the Charter of the European Parents' Association (European Parents' Association 1992, cited in OECD 1997) identifies nine sets of rights and duties of parents. The rights identified (many of which are guaranteed to Irish parents under the Education Act, 1998) include the right to recognition as primary educators, the right to full access to the education system on the basis of children's needs, merits and talents and the right to information held by schools regarding children's educational progress. Duties include parents' duty to commit themselves as partners in education, to give schools information relevant to their children's education and to 'be personally committed to their children's school as a vital part of the local community' (OECD 1997, 18).

1.3.2   Educational significance of parent-school partnership

Henderson and Berla (1994) have gathered, in one publication entitled *The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, sixty-six research studies that provide evidence indicating the central role the family plays in student achievement. The studies cover programmes and interventions in early childhood, elementary school and high school settings, school policies and family processes. The following are the major findings emanating from the studies, in the words of Henderson and Berla (1994, 14-16):

The family makes critical contributions to student achievement, from earliest childhood through high school. Efforts to improve children's outcomes are much more effective if they encompass families.
When parents are involved at school, not just at home, children do better in school and they stay in school longer.
When parents are involved at school, their children go to better schools.
Children do best when their parents are enabled to play four key roles in their children's learning: teachers, supporters, advocates and decision-makers.

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The more the relationship between family and school approaches a comprehensive, well-planned partnership, the higher the student achievement. Families, schools and community organizations all contribute to student achievement; the best results come when all three work together.

Common sense would seem to dictate that two vital institutions in a child's life, viz., the home and the school, should work together. The literature supports this view (e.g., Bastiani 1993, Comer and Haynes 1991, Epstein 1996). The Conference of Major Religious Superiors states that, underlying the concept of *educational disadvantage,* is the idea that there is a discontinuity between the school and non-school experiences of some children (Conference of Major Religious Superiors 1992, xvii). Krasnow (1990, 27) holds that the greater the differences between family and school, the less likely that a smooth transition between home and school will occur. If parent partnership reduces or closes this gap, then it is significant for educational reasons.

Parent-school partnership is important for pupil outcomes. Toomey (1989) contends that, when parents are involved with their children's school, the parents are more likely to learn more about their children's education and ways of helping them, which in turn leads to advantages for the children. It has been shown, e.g., that parental involvement in reading has a positive impact on the children's reading skills (Epstein 1995, Healy 1996, Healy 1997, Lannin 2005, National Literacy Trust 2001). Both student motivation and students' school behaviour are influenced by teachers' practices to involve parents (Epstein 1992). Driessen, Smit and Sleegers (2005, 514) note that parental involvement influences 'truancy behaviour, undertaking further education and level of aspiration.' As Miretzky (2004, 817) puts it, 'parents who feel comfortable and

valued contribute willingly to a school's success' and 'students who know that parents and teachers are regularly and respectfully in touch tend to work harder.'

Partnership is also important for teacher, parent, school and community outcomes. Through increased parental involvement in schools, school staff increase their knowledge base of the sociocultural context of the communities served by the school (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996). This knowledge base is likely to lead to an increased sense of efficacy among teachers, a more effective and improved classroom climate, and more effective classroom management strategies and pedagogy (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996). Parents who become involved in the school learn ways to help their children and become motivated to further their own education (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996). The stake parents have in their children's school success is a powerful change force when parent involvement is an integral and significant aspect of school changes processes (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996). When the family and the school team up, the school becomes a potent force in the community, in promoting healthy holistic development among all children (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996).

1.3.3 Economic significance of parent-school partnership

McCafferty and Canny (2008, 9) sum up the cyclical nature of the links between economic and educational disadvantage as follows:

> Educational disadvantage leads to social disadvantage both through the economic effect whereby the individuals' labour market prospects are impaired by lack of qualifications and basic skills, and through a group of wider social effects whereby low educational attainment may result in low self-confidence and self-esteem, and reduced social engagement. In turn, social disadvantage leads to educational disadvantage, both for

the individual concerned and, through the well-known intergenerational effect, for his or her dependants.

In answer to the question, 'Why respond to problems of disadvantage?', Kellaghan (2002, 18) offers a number of replies. One reply is that there is an economic justification for responding, that disadvantage is a drain on the economy. If parent-school partnership reduces educational disadvantage, then surely this drain on the economy will also be reduced. The economic significance of parent-school partnership can only be argued based on assumptions and deductions. As pointed out above, it could be argued that, when parents are involved with their children's school, the parents are more likely to learn more about their children's education and ways of helping them, which in turn leads to advantages for the children (Toomey 1989). Burch (1993) claims that when school climate becomes more collaborative, children win (Burch 1993, 16, citing Davies, Palanki and Burch 1993). This winning may take the shape of increased access to and participation in education. If, as a result of parent-school partnership, children have increased access to and participation in education, then they may have increased outcomes, and some of these will certainly have an economic significance as educational attainment is strongly linked with earnings (National Economic and Social Forum 2002).

1.4   Possible barriers to parent-school partnership

Parent partnership, whether it is welcomed or not by schools, must be implemented, or as Steele (1999, 135) states, 'there is … no doubting official conviction that parents must have their rightful place in the scheme of things and that that place is close to the very heart of things.' That is not to say that

implementing partnership is simple, straightforward and without challenge. The first difficulty arises from the search for a definition, as we shall see later. What exactly is *partnership*? What is it in the school context? The present author has seen the term interpreted in many ways in schools and agrees with Vincent and Tomlinson's (1997, 366) assertion that the term *partnership* suggests 'equals involved in a mutually supportive dialogue,' but also when they then go on to cast doubt on the realization of this definition in the schools.

Parent-school partnership may be difficult to achieve, and obstacles may be encountered on the way. Heywood-Everett (1999, 160) holds that the term is 'ambiguous, problematic and (for parents) disingenuous.' He poses the question, 'How are we to conceive of a *school's* (italics in original) partnership with a parent?' (Heywood-Everett 1999, 162). Heywood-Everett wonders whether the partnership is with the school or individual teachers therein and states that parents are not 'homes' in the same way as teachers are not 'schools.'

The construction of education as a 'market place' (Crozier 1997, McNamara, Hustler, Stronach, Rodrigo, Beresford and Botcherby 2000) could get in the way of partnership, as it may lead to an oppositional stance between school and parent, in that parents may be viewed as 'demanding consumers rather than participants in the education system' (Gale 1996, 130). Vincent (1997, 272) points out some further complexities blocking the path to partnership, speaking of the issues of inequality in power between professional teachers and lay parents, and the dimensions which contribute to this imbalance. She also draws

our attention to the tendency to treat 'the parent' as a single, undifferentiated category, a point also made by Gale (1996, 136) who warns against treating parents as 'a homogeneous group with a clearly defined set of common interests.' Crozier (1999, 327) argues that 'parents' perception of teachers as superior and distant is reinforced by teachers' own stance' and that 'this does little to encourage parents into a more proactive partnership.' Higgins (2007) highlights further barriers to partnership, e.g., the bureaucratic nature of schools where the formal interaction between parents and teachers hinders the building of mutual trust, the approach where blame for school failure is located outside of the school and over-critical parents.

The absence of a clear definition of partnership in the school context was referred to above. This situation is rendered even more confusing by the breadth of expectation surrounding the involvement of parents. Brain and Reid (2003, 291) believe that 'parental involvement is seen as a mechanism for simultaneously raising standards, developing new partnerships between schools and parents in the local community and promoting social inclusion.' Under the 'parental involvement' umbrella, they see parents as being invited to undertake various roles including being co-educators of their children, being involved in the monitoring and governance of schools, taking responsibility for their children's attendance, behaviour and willingness to learn in school and providing practical help to schools. The schools are expected to support and facilitate parental involvement and 'act as a resource in promoting the wider inclusion of families and the local community' (Brain and Reid 2003, 292).

In spite of these difficulties and complexities, some schools in Ireland have been making a genuine effort to achieve partnership (e.g., Lannin 2005, HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006).

1.5   Role of the author

The concept of parent-school partnership is of great interest to the author of this dissertation. This interest led her to become a Home/School/Community Liaison Coordinator in an urban primary school in 1999. (See Pages 14-16 below for a description of the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme). She occupied this position for one year before becoming principal in that school in 2000.

The author has undertaken two research projects, in the same school, on parental involvement in children's reading (Healy 1996, Healy 1997).

1.6   Description of school in which action research took place

St. Mary's (pseudonym) is a primary school with approximately four hundred pupils on the north side of Cork City. The north side of Cork has higher levels of unemployment, earlier school leaving and lower levels of household income than other areas of the city (Forde 2000). St. Mary's Primary School was founded in 1857 by a female religious community, with the present building dating back to 1974. St. Mary's has a strong Catholic ethos. At infant level, both boys and girls attend the school, after which the boys transfer to neighbouring boys' schools. The full-time teaching staff of twenty-two are, at the time of writing, all female. Up to 1999, the principal was a member of the

religious community. In that year, a lay principal was appointed for the first time.

The school has a respected tradition in the neighbourhood. It has excelled particularly in the musical field. School choirs have achieved success through the years, for example in Feis Maitiú, and this musical tradition is maintained to the present day. The parents and grandparents of many of the present pupils attended the school and some members of staff are past pupils.

In 1990, the school was conferred with *disadvantaged status* (Department of Education 1990). In 2006, the school was identified by the Department of Education and Science (hereinafter DES) as an Urban Band 2 school in the School Support Programme under the DEIS Action Plan for Educational Inclusion (Department of Education and Science 2005). This means that the school is in receipt of extra grants and resources and is part of the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme (Department of Education and Science 2007) and the School Completion Programme (Department of Education and Science 2008). In addition, from 2001-2008, the school has been part of the *Bridging the Gap* Project in collaboration with University College, Cork, a project aimed at addressing educational disadvantage (Deane 2004). The School Support Programme, the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme, the School Completion Programme and the *Bridging the Gap* Project will now be described, because each one impinges on the research project to be undertaken.

1.7 The School Support Programme

Implementation of the Department of Education and Science DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Action Plan for Educational Inclusion (Department of Education and Science 2005) began during the 2005/2006 school year and will continue until the end of the 2009/2010 school year. The aim of the action plan is 'to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people in disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed' (Department of Education and Science 2005, 9). The two core elements of DEIS are (a) a standardized system for identifying, and regularly reviewing, levels of disadvantage; and (b) an integrated School Support Programme (hereinafter SSP) which aims to bring together, and build upon, existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage (Department of Education and Science 2005, 9). (These existing interventions are described in Chapter Two, pp. 59-61.)

Schools in the SSP are supported by the DES to engage in planning, target-setting and ongoing review. Professional development is provided for principals and teachers in the schools. A key objective of the plan is to enhance partnership between the DES, education agencies and providers and other relevant government departments, agencies, organizations and groups (Department of Education and Science 2005).

In February 2008, 664 primary schools and 203 post-primary schools were part of the SSP. Amongst the supports received by schools in the SSP at primary

level are additional capitation grants, financial allocation under the school books grant scheme, access to the School Meals Programme, access to after-school and holiday support for young people, access to transfer programmes supporting progression from primary to second-level and access to planning and professional development supports.

1.8   The Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme

The Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme (hereinafter HSCL) was established in 1990, when thirty teachers were appointed as coordinators in fifty-five primary schools in areas of urban disadvantage (Department of Education and Science 2007). The scheme was extended in 1991 to thirteen post-primary schools serving children who already had the service at primary level. Subsequently the scheme was offered to designated primary schools in urban areas with high concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and to second level schools serving children who had benefited from the service at primary level.

In 2007, 278 primary schools and 188 schools at second level were in the scheme (Department of Education and Science 2007).

The aims of the HSCL Scheme are:

- To maximize active participation of the children in the schools of the scheme in the learning process, in particular those who might be at risk of failure

- To promote active co-operation between home, school and relevant community agencies in promoting the educational interests of the children

- To raise awareness in parents of their own capacities to enhance their children's educational progress and to assist them in developing relevant skills

- To enhance the children's uptake from education, their retention in the educational system, their continuation to post-compulsory education and to third level and their attitudes to life-long learning

- To disseminate the positive outcomes of the scheme throughout the school system generally (Department of Education and Science 2007)

The HSCL Scheme is a preventative scheme, concerned with establishing partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers in the interests of children's learning (Department of Education and Science 2007).

A National Coordinator and Regional Coordinators advise on and support the development of the scheme, liaise with participants in the scheme at local level and provide a link between local and national levels (Department of Education and Science 2007).

HSCL Coordinators are permanent teachers on the staffs of schools in which they serve. These coordinators work in a full-time capacity to support parents in their children's education and do not have teaching duties.

1.8.1   The HSCL Scheme in St. Mary's School

St. Mary's School became part of the HSCL Scheme in 1994, when a full-time coordinator was appointed. Since then, four members of the teaching staff have, in turn, occupied the position. A section of the school building is devoted specifically to parents. This consists of two parents' rooms and an office for the HSCL Coordinator.   The work of the coordinator consists mainly of the following:

- Organization of courses and classes for parents in the areas of curriculum, personal development, parenting, leisure activities and aspects of educational development ranging from basic literacy/numeracy to certificate examination subjects

- Home visitation with the objective of establishing bonds of trust with parents and families and supporting parents in the identification of their developmental needs (Department of Education and Science 2007)

- The training of parents as educational home visitors and classroom aides

- The involvement of parents in their children's learning

- The facilitation of parents and teachers working together on policy formation

- Networking with voluntary and statutory agencies

1.9 **The School Completion Programme**

The School Completion Programme (hereinafter SCP) is a Department of Education and Science programme which aims to have a significant positive impact on levels of young people's retention in primary and second level

schools and on numbers of pupils who successfully complete the Senior Cycle, or equivalent (Department of Education and Science 2008). SCP, established in 2002, replaced the earlier Early School Leavers' Initiative (Martin 1998a) and the Stay in School Retention Initiative (Martin 1999). SCP is a key component of the Department of Education and Science's strategy to discriminate positively in favour of children and young people who are at risk of or who are experiencing educational disadvantage and is integrated into the School Support Programme, as part of the DEIS Action Plan (Department of Education and Science 2005). SCP focuses on those who are at risk of educational disadvantage and of early school-leaving. Selected schools at primary and second levels that form an educational community network serving areas with the highest levels of disadvantage and early school leaving are invited by the DES to participate in the SCP. Participating schools are required, in collaboration with the representatives of local statutory and voluntary agencies, to devise focused and targeted integrated plans in the holistic support of young people at risk (Department of Education and Science 2008).

At local level, SCP is managed by a specially constituted committee of representatives of schools and other relevant agencies. A local coordinator oversees the day-to-day running of the project at local level. This involves coordinating the work of project workers who, typically, consist of support teachers and/or youth workers.

1.9.1   The SCP in St. Mary's School

St. Mary's was part of the Early School Leavers' Initiative (Martin 1998a) since the inception of the latter in 1998 and became part of SCP in 2002. St. Mary's School collaborates each school year with the local SCP Management Committee to formulate and submit the Local Retention Plan. St. Mary's shares a SCP project worker with a neighbouring school. Each school year, school staff, in consultation and collaboration with the local SCP coordinator and SCP project worker, compile a list of children deemed most at risk of early school leaving for inclusion in the SCP. When compiling this list, factors considered include data relating to children's attendance as well as family history of school completion. Parental consent must be obtained for children to participate in the SCP.

In St. Mary's, the project worker works with the principal, class teachers, learning-support teachers, resource teachers and parents to compile individual education plans (IEPs) for the children in the SCP. Depending on the child's needs, programmes for these children may have social, personal development, leisure or academic components and usually contain after-school and holiday activities. A family component of the SCP is that siblings of the targeted children, while not directly involved in the programme, are frequently included in the holiday and out-of-school activities.

1.10 **The *Bridging the Gap* Project**

The *Bridging the Gap* Project 'aims to "bridge the gap" between the educational opportunities and achievements of pupils in schools in

disadvantaged areas of Cork city and those in other areas' (Deane 2004, 4). The project, which is coordinated by University College, Cork (hereinafter UCC), is funded jointly by the DES and private funding sourced by UCC. The project was initially a five-year project (2001 – 2006) which was extended on a limited basis for a further two years (2006-2008).

Deane (2004, 5) states that the project aims particularly to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds:

- to stay in full-time education for as long as possible and to achieve their full potential

- to have a positive and rewarding experience of schooling

- to develop the necessary skills and motivation to be lifelong learners

- to leave school with appropriate certification of their achievements

- to become, ultimately, gainfully employed, constructive and caring citizens

Bridging the Gap has five strands, viz., research, networks, dissemination, professional development and school and community-based projects (Deane 2005).

1.10.1 *Bridging the Gap* in St. Mary's School

St. Mary's School was invited by UCC, in early 2001, to participate in the *Bridging the Gap* Project. The Board of Management of St. Mary's welcomed this invitation and subsequently approved the proposal, devised by the teaching staff, to make literacy the central focus of the project in the school. The project is, at the time of writing, in its eighth and final year. Plans are underway in the

school to continue the project independently when the support of the university is no longer available.

The aims of the *Bridging the Gap* Project at St. Mary's School are:

- To foster an awareness in parents of their role as the primary educators of their children

- To involve parents in developing their children's reading skills

- To foster a love of books

- To improve the reading competency of the children taking part in the project

- To improve the children's oral language competency

- To improve the children's scores on standardized reading tests

- To develop storytime as a time of bonding between parent and child

The project was planned initially by the principal, HSCL Coordinator and the Junior Infant teachers in the school, in collaboration with UCC. As the project progressed, parents became involved in planning and evaluating, leading to subsequent action. For the first three years of the project, i.e., 2001-2004, the children who started school in September 2001 were the focus of the project. With funding from the project, a large selection of books for young children was bought during these three school years. In the school year 2001/2002, the parents of the children in the four Junior Infant classes received training in reading to their children. Volunteering parents came to the school four afternoons a week and read to the children in these classes, over two six-week periods. During the 2002/2003 school year the project retained the format of the previous year, but extended its scope to include reading by older pupils to

the younger pupils, then in their second year at school, using a process known as 'paired reading' (Topping 1995). Parental involvement was, however, still the main focus and continued to be an important component of the programme during the 2003/2004 school year also when literacy was taught through ICT.

At the end of the initial three-year period (2001-2004), school staff and parents, in consultation with the Board of Management, decided that, instead of working with a cohort of children for three years, the project would work with a cohort for just one school year. The reasons for this decision were two-fold. First, it was difficult to maintain parental participation for three years; a year-long commitment seemed more feasible. Second, a three-year project with one class meant exclusion from the project for some children. It was therefore decided to work henceforth each year with the children in First Class and their parents. Each school year since September 2004, the project has consisted of parental involvement at First Class level in three six-week literacy modules, viz., storybook reading, paired reading and literacy through IT. An in-depth description of the work undertaken in the project during the 2004/2005 school year is presented in Chapter Two, where it is demonstrated that the project has been successful in achieving its aims.

1.11 <u>Definitions</u>

In order to work towards setting the present study in context, it is important to present a range of definitions for key terms used in the dissertation. Bearing in mind the fact that 'definitions arise in different contexts, locations and places in time' (Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur 2006, 49) and 'can be political

constructs … used for a range of different purposes' (Burgess et al. 2006, 49) we will seek to find definitions pertinent to the work in hand.

1.11.1 Educational disadvantage

In their work *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland,* Kellaghan, Weir, ÓhUalacháin and Morgan (1995, 2) point out that there have been remarkably few efforts to define the term *educational disadvantage* and that other terms, e.g., *marginalized, underprivileged* and *at risk* are frequently assumed to have the same meaning. Perhaps this is as a result of the complexity of the notion of educational disadvantage. Boldt and Devine (1998, 8) focus our minds on this complexity when they pose such questions as:

- What precisely makes one person educationally disadvantaged, another at an acceptable level and someone else advantaged?

- What is the cut-off point below which an individual or group is considered educationally disadvantaged?

- Should different criteria be used for different groups?

- At what point can one say that educational disadvantage has been reduced or eliminated?

The purpose of this section is to arrive at a definition of educational disadvantage which will be used for the purpose of this dissertation. While no definition of educational disadvantage answers all of the above questions, different researchers and writers add to our understanding of the term. It should also be remembered that the term "disadvantage" 'does not have a universally-agreed meaning and may refer to different populations in different countries' (Government of Ireland 1993, 143). Some writers (e.g., Downes and Gilligan

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2007, Spring 2007) even question whether the term *educational disadvantage* is 'an appropriate metaphor for what we aspire to create, namely, a life-long organic education system that encourages everyone in our society to achieve their full range of potentials' (Downes and Gilligan 2007, 464).

While international writers in the field will be cited, it is to the Irish context we will look as we attempt to select the working definition which will be used for the present research.

The Education Act, 1998 defines educational disadvantage as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools' (Article 32:9). This is a very important definition as it is the only definition of educational disadvantage that, in the Irish context, is enshrined in law. It is interesting to note that this definition seems to be taken from a one-sided stance, i.e., the students are not benefiting from their education due to something outside of the educational system, and that 'something' is a factor associated with their parents/home background. It is also interesting to observe that this definition echoes a definition provided by UNESCO almost three decades earlier, in 1970. UNESCO defined a child as being disadvantaged if 'for socio-cultural reasons, s/he comes to school with knowledge, skills and attitudes, which impede learning and make adjustment difficult' (INTO 1994, 24). Hyland (2005, 2) suggests a further difficulty with this definition, positing that the Act 'clearly sees educational disadvantage in the formal school context and does not refer to education that is provided in other contexts.' This,

in Hyland's (2005, 2) view, leads to a fragmentation in policy, a failure both to gain maximum benefit from the various programmes which have been put in place and to take account of international evidence that 'an integrated approach is a better way of dealing with educational disadvantage.'

The *Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* contained the view that the concept of disadvantage continues to be defined in terms of those groups who are found in a position of low status, power and influence relative to the dominant groups within a society, with school failure as the most obvious personal characteristic associated with the term (National Forum Secretariat 1998, 72).

The Conference of Major Religious Superiors (hereinafter CMRS) looks at the concept in terms of an explanation as to why children from poor backgrounds do not derive the same benefit from schooling as their financially better-off counterparts, positing that underlying the concept of educational disadvantage is the idea that there is a discontinuity between the school and non-school experiences of children who are poor (Conference of Major Religious Superiors 1992, xvii). This corresponds with earlier definitions (e.g., Passow 1970). However, CMRS further stresses the need to focus on the school's inability to cope with the needs of the disadvantaged child (Conference of Major Religious Superiors 1992, 11), providing a more balanced view than that inherent in the Education Act, 1998 definition. This need to look outside the home background of the child and focus on the other institutions impinging on a child's education is a major component of recent understandings of

disadvantage and, indeed, it differentiates recent understandings from earlier understandings in a profound way. Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990, 7) provide this more balanced view when they contend that students who are educationally disadvantaged have been exposed to insufficient education experience in at least one of three domains, i.e., the school, the family or the student's community (Natriello, McDill and Pallas 1990, 13).

Taking up this theme, Kellaghan (2001, 3) attempts to define educational disadvantage 'in terms which are more educationally relevant than most existing definitions by focusing on the nature of problems which children from backgrounds associated with disadvantage might experience when they go to school.' Critiquing the definition provided in the Education Act, 1998, Kellaghan (2001, 3) believes that it 'provides little guidance for educational intervention' as well as exhibiting a number of other inadequacies. He criticizes a failure to recognize the role of cultural as well as social and economic factors and the fact that the term being defined is also used in the definition. (The role of cultural, social and economic factors are described in Chapter Two, pp. 45-49.) Kellaghan (2001, 4) contends that no attempt is made to define the impediments 'that might be regarded as constituting the core of disadvantage.' While not providing an exact definition, he proposes that educational disadvantage is defined in terms of (a) 'discontinuities between the competencies and dispositions which children bring to school and the competencies and dispositions valued in schools'; and (b) 'factors, conceptualized in terms of three forms of "capital" (economic, cultural, social) which influence development of the competencies and dispositions' (Kellaghan

2001, 3). Kellaghan (2001, 15) claims that this conceptualization provides 'a concrete focus for identifying and addressing problems which a child may encounter in adapting to the work of the school.'

Boldt and Devine (1998, 10) put forward the following definition of educational disadvantage:

> In relation to a student in the formal education system, educational disadvantage may be considered to be a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one's peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s)he has been socialized (as opposed to those to which (s)he is naturally endowed).

This definition is broader in concept than the definition provided by the Education Act, 1998, focusing our attention not just on the student's home experience but also on school processes. However, there is a hint of reproach inherent in the definition, both towards home and school. Compare Boldt and Devine's definition with the definition supplied by the Combat Poverty Agency:

> Educational disadvantage is defined as the complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community (including economic, social, cultural and educational factors), which result in a young person deriving less benefit from formal education than their peers.
> (Combat Poverty Agency 1998, Introduction)

This definition of educational disadvantage captures the complexity of the concept of educational disadvantage. It does not apportion blame, but sees educational disadvantage as a result of an interplay of factors and not just a simple, linear, uncomplicated entity.

We have considered various definitions of educational disadvantage and, despite the reservations expressed concerning the definition provided by the Education Act, 1998, it is this definition which will be used in the present research because it is the only definition, in an Irish context, which is framed in legislation. Because of this, it is the definition which must underpin all actions taken by schools, using funds and resources provided by the Irish government, to address educational disadvantage. To reiterate, the Education Act, 1998 definition (Article 32:9) is as follows:

> "Educational disadvantage" means the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.

1.11.2 Community

A definition of community is needed for the present study because developing links between schools and the local community is considered to be an important strategy in addressing educational disadvantage (e.g., Department of Education and Science 2005). Furthermore it is noted in Chapter Two (pp. 90-105) that parent-school partnership is influenced by many factors, including the community in which the parent and child live and in which the school is situated.

It is Getzels's (1978, 662) contention that, 'despite beliefs to the contrary, there is little that is self-evident about how to identify and study *the* (italics in original) community or the role of the community in the child's education.' There are many understandings of community and a great volume of literature exists on the subject (e.g., Barth 1969, Calderwood 2000, Cohen 1985,

Coleman and Hoffer 1987, Etzioni 1993, Hillary 1986, Sergiovanni 1994).

According to Calderwood (2000, 6), the word *community* has two important meanings in current popular usage. First, it labels specific groups of people. Second, it 'describes specific social relations among people within a social group.' Broadening the concept, Morris (1997, 387) holds that 'the complex concept of community is currently used to describe both a physical grouping and, in some circumstances, the sense of commonly held values, attitudes and practices of particular people without necessarily implying close physical proximity.'

Getzels (1978, 237), posing a number of questions, focuses our minds on the difficulty surrounding the meaning of the term when related to the school. He wonders whether the community refers to the neighbourhood in which the school is located, the families whose children attend the school even if they do not live in the neighbourhood, the administrative district responsible for operating the school, the political entity whose taxes support the school or to a community of minds. In a school context, Miretzky (2004, 819) defines 'community' as 'the cohesion among those who are stakeholders in a school, built on acceptance of differences, a commitment to the common good, and a recognition that the school and its environment are interdependent and mutually supportive.' Sergiovanni (1994, xvi, quoted in Healy 1999, 106) defines community as a 'collection of individuals who are bonded together by natural will' who come to share 'common sentiments and traditions as part of a tightly knit web of meaningful relationships.'

It is to Epstein (1995) that we turn for the understanding of the term *community* as it is used in this dissertation because Epstein and her colleagues (Ames, Khoju and Watkins 1993, Becker and Epstein 1982, Connors and Epstein 1995, Dauber and Epstein 1993, Dolan and Haxby 1995) have undertaken a vast amount of research on family-school partnerships and her typology of family-school partnership (Epstein and Dauber 1991) will be used as a framework in the present action research project. Epstein (1995, 229) points out that the term *community* demands new attention in studies of school, family and community partnerships. She understands it to refer to all individuals and institutions, both inside and outside of school, who have a stake in children's school success and in the well-being of children and families. This includes schools, families, neighbourhood groups, clubs, associations, businesses, libraries, local government, religious organizations, parks and recreation departments, police and juvenile justice offices, social service and health agencies, and others who serve families routinely or in times of trouble (Epstein 1995, 229). Epstein (1992, 14) states:

> Community refers to the child's home neighbourhood, the school neighbourhood, school context, and the wider local community of business, civic, cultural, religious, and other organizations and agencies that influence children's learning and development and that could enhance family and school influences on children.

1.11.2.1   <u>The School Community</u>

Goodlad (1984, 353) refers to 'the concept of an ecology of educating institutions.' This concept embraces the broader definition of community dealt with in the previous section but, within the school, a community also exists. Calderwood (2000) refers to the difficulty of describing community. She (2000, 1) reminds us that 'the idea of community will likely mean something

different at each school, and the social relations and practices of community will proceed and be understood uniquely at every school, if they are there at all.'

Understandings of components of the school community include the sharing of vision and aims (Prendergast 2003), relationships (Sergiovanni 1994), the use of symbols (Healy 1999), symbolic behaviour (Calderwood 2000) and shared values (Redding 1997). Dewey (1966,4), commenting on what people must have in common to form a community, lists 'aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge' and 'a common understanding.' Pintrich and Schunk (2002, 363) note that, while a sense of community is 'a rather vague construct,' it would include 'individuals' feelings that they belong to the group … that they are committed to the organization's goals and values' and that 'there is some reciprocity in the relation such that the representatives of the organization care about and are concerned about the individual group member.' Calderwood (2000, 2) states that 'the social relations of community are grounded in individuated and group identity.' Norlander-Case, Reagan and Case (1999, 86) speak of an 'educative community' that would 'advantage individuals through the collection of knowledge and skills held by all its members.'

Prendergast (2003, 109) contends that 'community grows when people share vision and aims, when they feel that they belong, are allowed to contribute, have a say in where things are going, are recognised.' Sergiovanni (1994, xiii) states that community is 'the tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant than themselves: shared values and

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ideals.' Caldwell and Spinks (1992, 115) consider that 'in many respects a school is a community of communities,' three of these being the community of teachers, the community of parents and the community of students. Caldwell and Spinks (1992, 115) also speak of the 'learning community' in a school. Speaking of ways in which 'teachers, parents and others can play their part in achieving excellence,' they consider that 'the focus is on learning and teaching and outcomes for students' and that 'the image is that of school leaders engaged in "nurturing a learning community"' (Caldwell and Spinks 1992, 115).

Redding's (1997) definition will be used for the purpose of this dissertation. He defines a school community as 'a group of people—including teachers, school staff, students, and families of students—who are intimately attached to a specific school, share common educational values about the academic and social learning of its students, and communicate and associate with one another in furtherance of their shared educational values.'

1.11.3 Parent

The definition of *parent* provided by the Education Act, 1998 will be used for the purpose of this dissertation. Under the Act (Article 2),

> "Parent" includes a foster parent, a guardian appointed under the Guardianship of Children Acts, 1964 to 1977, or other person acting in *loco parentis* who has a child in his or her care subject to any statutory power or order of a court and, in the case of a child who has been adopted under the Adoptions Acts, 1952 to 1998, or, where the child has been adopted outside the State, means the adopter or adopters or the surviving adopter.

1.11.4 Parent-school partnership

In social discourse, the idea of *partnership* has gained currency in recent decades (e.g., Conroy 1996, Lee 1996) and the concept of *parent-school partnership* has been put forward as a crucial element contributing to children's success in school (e.g., Alexander 1997, Department of Education 1991, Department of Education 1995, Government of Ireland 1996, Martin 1998, National Forum Secretariat 1998). The use of the term *school and family partnerships* is preferable to *involvement* or *home-school relations*, in the view of Epstein (1992, 1), as 'it emphasizes that the two institutions share major responsibilities for children's education, and recognizes the importance and potential influence of all family members, not just the parents.' Many schools claim to have achieved *partnership* with parents, but the physical manifestations of this can be as varied as involving parents in looking after the school garden, seeking their help in fundraising or their collaboration in policy-making (e.g., Becker and Epstein 1982, Burch 1993, Davies 1990, Epstein 1992, Hughes, Wikeley and Nash 1994, Krasnow 1990, Toomey 1989, White, Taylor and Moss 1992). This suggests that partnership may have an 'elastic meaning' (Vincent 1993, 231) and also points to the fact that, while definitions can be found, the realisation of the term is open to interpretation. Neither is it an easily attainable state, as Bastiani (1993, 104) reminds us, advising that it might be more appropriate to talk about *working towards partnership.* For Lysaght (1993, 196), the term 'denotes an end state which may only be achieved through tacit, trial and error, stages of active participation with parents in education.'

The Irish Government White Paper on Education (Government of Ireland 1995, 7) sees effective partnership as involving 'active co-operation among those directly involved in the provision of education and the anchoring of educational institutions and structures in the wider communities they serve.' With reference to the Education (No.2) Bill 1997, the then Minister for Education, Michéal Martin stated: 'Partnership implies that the partners act together through seeking common ground and consensus, rather than any one of them seeking to impose a particular view. It implies a process of discussion and negotiation, rather than coercion, and it encompasses a tolerance, even encouragement, of diversity rather than uniformity' (Martin 1998, 2). It is interesting to note that, while partnership with parents is enshrined in law in the Education Act, 1998, no definition of partnership is included in the Act itself.

Hughes, Wikeley and Nash define a *partner* as 'someone who is closely involved with a school, someone who shares – and even helps to shape – the aims of the school, and is committed to putting these aims into practice' (Hughes, Wikeley and Nash 1994, 7) while, for Block (1993, 28), 'partnership means to be connected to another in a way that the power between us is roughly balanced.'

Pugh and De'Ath (1989, 68) define partnership as 'a working relationship that is characterized by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect, and the willingness to negotiate,' further stating that 'this implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability' (Pugh

and De'Ath 1989, 68). Conaty (2002, 110) holds that 'partnership invites people to share power and to welcome mutual vulnerability' and that it is 'brought about by a consistent commitment to the demanding and painful work of human relating.' Prendergast (2003, 109) describes partnership as 'an inspiring and transforming ideal that brings into play a set of fundamental values relating to people and to the culture of their institutions.'

Driessen, Smit and Sleegers (2005, 528) believe that 'educational partnership presupposes mutual respect, shared interests and open communication between parents, teachers and the school.' They define educational partnership as 'the process in which partners aim to strengthen and support each others' skills in order to produce results which signify an improvement for the children involved' (Driessen, Smit and Sleegers 2005, 528). This definition will be used for the purpose of this dissertation as the action research project being carried out will presuppose mutual respect, shared interests and open communication between the parents and teachers involved and will involve the teachers and parents working to strengthen and support each others' skills to produce enhanced outcomes for the children.

1.12   <u>Research questions</u>

The research questions are as follows:

    a) What is parent-school partnership?

    b) How can parent-school partnership be improved in an urban primary school?

c) How can parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage be involved in parent-school partnership?

These research questions are addressed within this dissertation as follows:

Research Question (a) is addressed through a review of the literature and in the action research, where a major focus was on the shared construction of parent-school partnership.

Research Question (b) was the main focus of this action research.

Research Question (c) involved a particular focus on parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage and the key research with these parents is reported in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   **Introduction**

This chapter will consist of four sections. The first section will be concerned with educational disadvantage, especially as it relates to parent-school partnership. In the second section, the history, evolution and current status of parent-school partnership in Irish education will be presented. The third section will outline a conceptual framework for parent-school partnership. Partnership models and themes on parent-school partnership arising from the literature will be described in the final section.

2.2   **Educational disadvantage**

2.2.1   **Introduction**

In order to answer the research question, 'How can parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage be involved in parent-school partnership?', we now need to examine the literature on educational disadvantage.

Educational disadvantage is an abiding problem for parents, students, schools and governments worldwide (e.g., Blossfeld and Shavit 1993, Jonsson 1993, More 1993, Osborn, Broadfoot, Planel and Pollard 1997, Shiel, Cosgrove, Sofroniou and Kelly 2001, Singh 2001, Teese 2000, Woods and Levacic 2002). The correlates of educational disadvantage are wide ranging. For instance, young people experiencing educational disadvantage score lower on tests and examinations than other children (Duncan and Seymour 2000, Morais,

Fontinhas and Neves 1992, National Commission on Education 1996, Natriello et al. 1990, Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston and Smith 1994, Van de Werfhorst, Sullivan and Yi Cheung 2003). They are 'disaffected' from the school system or have chronic absenteeism (Department of Education 1994). They have limited choice at transition points in education (Hatcher 1998). Some are 'early school leavers' (Smyth and Hattam 2002) or do not proceed to third-level education (Blackburn and Jarman 1993, Clancy 1988, Clancy 1995, Clancy 2001, Halsey 1992).

What we need to establish, for the purpose of this dissertation, is the link between parents and educational disadvantage. Reading the literature, it is difficult to determine the exact position of parents in relation to educational disadvantage. In reality, 'educational disadvantage is a complex, multifaceted condition' (Department of Education and Science 1999a, 33), a fact which is acknowledged by the Combat Poverty Agency in its definition of educational disadvantage:

> Educational disadvantage is defined as the complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community (including economic, social, cultural and educational factors), which result in a young person deriving less benefit from formal education than their peers.
> (Combat Poverty Agency 1998, Introduction)

Bearing this 'complex interaction of factors' in mind, we will now look at the evidence as we explore the role of parents in educational disadvantage.

2.2.2 Educational disadvantage as it is viewed in Ireland

When one considers the indicators of educational disadvantage used by the Irish Government Department of Education and Science, one notes how central

the Department considers parents and the family to be in the area of educational disadvantage.

The first major initiative introduced by the Irish Government to combat educational disadvantage was the Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage, introduced in 1984 (Department of Education and Science 2008b). While indicators were not in place at that stage, the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (hereinafter SERC) (Government of Ireland 1993) lists 'high unemployment, poverty, poor levels of education among adults, high levels of crime, poor attendance at school, truancy, school failure, early drop-out from school and disruptive behaviour' as among the factors which were considered initially in the identification of the first schools to be designated as being in areas of disadvantage.

Specific indicators were introduced for the first time by the Department of Education in 1990 to assist in the identification of schools for inclusion in the Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage, and these indicators are all family-related. The criteria were set down in an attempt to assess the level of economic and social disadvantage in an area. In the words of the Department of Education Circular to schools, 'criteria relate to the proportion of pupils from families in local authority housing, families who hold medical cards and families who are in receipt of unemployment benefit or assistance' (Department of Education 1990).

The indicators used to identify schools for inclusion in the *Breaking the Cycle* Scheme (Department of Education and Science 2008d), set up in 1996/97, were more specifically parent related. While schools were asked to indicate the number of pupils in their reception classes who lived in local authority accommodation and whose family held a medical card, they were also requested to indicate the number of pupils in reception classes whose mother had not taken the Group or Intermediate Certificate Examination, whose father had not taken at least the Group or Intermediate Certificate Examination, who lived in a family in which the main breadwinner had been unemployed for more than a year and who lived in a lone-parent family (Department of Education and Science 2008d).

In May 2005, the Department of Education and Science surveyed all primary schools in Ireland in order to get an updated view of levels of disadvantage (Department of Education and Science 2005b). An examination of the criteria used in this survey indicates how closely DES associates educational disadvantage with parents and the home. The criteria used in this survey were:

(a) children who come from a family where the main earner is unemployed

(b) children who live in local authority housing

(c) children of parents in receipt of medical cards

(d) children of lone parents

(e) children from families of five or more children

(f) children, one of whose parents did not complete the Junior Certificate or an equivalent examination

Each of these indicators is sited in the home, with parents mentioned specifically in half the criteria. It should be borne in mind that, though the indicators relate to international research findings, to an extent, all such instruments are "crude."

Let us look now at views of some Irish writers on the indicators of educational disadvantage. We will do this in an attempt to expand on, and give substance to, the indicators used by the Irish Government. This section will contain references to reports commissioned by the Irish Government as well as the work of independent researchers.

Boldt and Devine (1998, 15) found that, in much of the literature, 'factors and indicators of educational disadvantage often parallel one another.' It is certainly sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two and taking both into account may, therefore, lead to a more comprehensive view of educational disadvantage.

Criteria set down by the Department of Education and Science to identify educational disadvantage are narrowly focused, dealing exclusively with facts concerned with the immediate family of young people. Other writers and bodies commenting on educational disadvantage take a broader view. For instance, the SERC Report (Government of Ireland 1993, 144) adds to the criteria laid down by Government documents, stating that 'to these may be added today violent and criminal behaviour, general family dysfunction and substance abuse.' The concentration of children from economically

disadvantaged areas in schools and the duration of this disadvantage are deemed by this Report (Government of Ireland 1993) to be critical when considering the indicators for educational disadvantage.

In its submissions to the Minister for Education and Science in 2003, the Educational Disadvantage Committee refers to 'problems with selection criteria' and considers that 'there are issues about whether socioeconomic, educational, or a combination of socioeconomic and educational variables should be used' (Educational Disadvantage Committee 2004, 4). Kellaghan et al. (1995, 39) consider that 'pupils' school performance may be regarded as the most significant indicator of educational disadvantage as far as the educational system is concerned.' It is the view of the Educational Disadvantage Committee that it would be difficult to defend using educational variables alone in view of the fact that the Education Act, 1998 (Section 32:9) definition of educational disadvantage 'specifies social and economic factors that represent "*impediments to education*"' (parenthesis and italics in original) (Educational Disadvantage Committee 2004, 4).

Educational disadvantage is not viewed, in all cases, to be inextricably linked to social disadvantage. Conaty (2002, 39) points out that 'families within any socio-economic group vary considerably' as does the performance of children at school. Citing de Jong (1993), she states that 'processes in the home that are considered to play an important part in child development include the involvement of parents with their children, their level of communication and general organization within the home' (Conaty 2002, 39). The Department of

Education (1995, 2) concurs, stating that 'the more proximal environmental conditions which give rise to disadvantage are to be found in the home and in school and appear to relate to disadvantage independently of the variance they share with the conceptually more distal conditions of socioeconomic disadvantage.'

2.2.3 Educational disadvantage and the socio-economic status of parents

Educational disadvantage is a fact of life for many of the children of parents from a lower socio-economic or a socio-economically disadvantaged background (e.g., Duncan and Seymour 2000, Kellaghan et al. 1995, Kerckhoff, Fogelman and Manlove 1997, OECD 2006, Shiel et al. 2001). In fact, 'the bond between social class and educational achievement is a particularly powerful and resistant one' (Harris and Ranson 2005, 571). While acknowledging the danger of 'reading' the problem outward (Connell 1994, 126) from the school to the family and of using a 'rationale of deficit' (Connell 1994, 131), we cannot ignore the evidence: the educational success or otherwise of children is associated, in many instances, with the position of their parents in society. While the Irish situation is mirrored internationally (e.g., Blackburn and Jarman 1993, Halsey 1992, Morais et al. 1992, National Commission on Education 1996, Natriello et al. 1990, Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston and Smith 1994, Van de Werfhorst et al. 2003), the evidence presented from studies in the remainder of this section will be drawn from an Irish context.

When they go to school, children's attainment levels are frequently associated with parental background, with children from lower socio-economic backgrounds often achieving lower scores in tests and examinations than children of higher socio-economic parents. It should be pointed out that the studies cited in this section do not control for IQ. The evidence is particularly stark with relation to reading scores in Irish primary schools, as Weir (2001) reveals. Weir reviewed and summarized data from a variety of studies on the reading achievement of Irish primary school pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. She found that the reading achievement of children in designated disadvantaged schools is consistently lower than that of children in non-designated schools and, where schools serve concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, literacy problems are particularly serious (Weir 2001). A more recent study further highlights the situation. Eivers, Shiel and Shortt (2004) found that, at Third and Sixth Class levels, children of employed mothers had higher mean scores than children of unemployed mothers. The First Class and Sixth Class children of unemployed fathers achieved lower mean scores than those whose fathers were employed. Parents' education was also found to be a significant factor. Eivers et al.'s (2004) study found that the children of parents who had never sat a post-primary school examination achieved the lowest mean reading score, with the highest mean scores being found amongst those children whose parents had a degree (Eivers et al. 2004). Hillman (1996, 2) puts it very plainly: 'The clear message is that pupils in disadvantaged areas are less likely to do well at school.'

There is also the question of poor school attendance and early school-leaving as it relates to the economic status of parents. In a school attendance/truancy report issued by the Irish Minister for Education in 1994 it was stated that, in the great majority of cases, serious non-attendance is linked to disadvantage. The report acknowledged that, in the experience of school attendance officers, problems of truancy or persistent non-attendance were concentrated in areas of economic or social disadvantage (Department of Education 1994). A report by the National Economic and Social Forum (National Economic and Social Forum 2002) showed the link between early school leaving and disadvantage. A report published by the Department of Education and Science in 2003 showed a disproportionately high early school-leaving rate for young people in some socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Walshe 2003). Parents are not specifically mentioned in this context, but the implication is there that it is mainly the children of lower socio-economic parents who are consistently absent from school or who leave school without having taken the Leaving Certificate examination.

The effects of parental occupation on young people's chances of proceeding to third level education are widely documented (e.g., Clancy 1988, Clancy 1995, Clancy 2001). A study by Clancy (2001) showed that, although each socio-economic grouping in Ireland had increased its representation at third level between 1988 and 1998, the lower socio-economic groups were still seriously under-represented at third level. The study found that 58% of those entering higher education were from four socio-economic groups, viz., higher professional, lower professional, employers and managers, and farmers,

although these groups constituted just 37% of the relevant age cohort. By contrast, 41% of entrants came from the other six socio-economic groups, viz., non-manual, manual skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, own account workers and agricultural workers, even though they constituted 63% of the relevant age cohort. A report published by the Department of Education and Science in 2003 stated that only 20% of the lowest income groups go to third level, compared to 97% of the highest (Flynn 2003). Clancy (2001, 158) states that 'the more prestigious the sector and field of study, the greater the social inequality in participation levels.'

Kellaghan (2001, 4) contends that 'the key to understanding disadvantage, and to addressing problems associated with it' may lie in an explanation of the 'impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage' referred to in the Education Act, 1998 definition of educational disadvantage. Kellaghan (2001,7) refers to the factors in children's environments 'affecting the development of competencies and dispositions, in some cases facilitating scholastic progress, in other cases resulting in difficulty in adapting to school.' He contends that these are conceptualized in terms of three types of 'capital,' viz., economic or financial capital, cultural capital and social capital. Each of these is intrinsically connected with the role of parents and will now be examined.

 'Economic capital relates to the material, particularly the financial, resources that are available to families and communities' (Kellaghan 2001, 8). 'Its potency in the educational field,' according to O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2004,

8), 'is manifest in the capacity of some individuals to purchase different types of educational services (e.g., private education, distance learning courses) and associated resources (e.g., childcare, transport, books, ICT equipment etc.).' Recent surveys reveal that record numbers of second-level students are taking grinds at a cost of up to €50 per hour (Flynn 2006), thereby placing those students in an advantageous position compared with their less well-off counterparts. Speaking of disadvantage, Hillman states that, 'in many senses, the term simply means "poverty"' (Hillman 1996, 2). Mortimore and Whitty (2000) describe the impact of social disadvantage on children's educational opportunities. Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely than other children to live in a worse environment, in poor quality housing and in proximity to drugs and crime. Hillman (1996, 3-4) adds to this list. He contends that poverty results in stress, and that less money is available for books or other educational resources. Poverty also makes it necessary for teenagers to be in paid employment which in turn could cause absenteeism or early school-leaving. Health problems are more likely and these have an effect on physical and intellectual development. Housing problems may cause a lack of quiet space for homework, and there may be limited access to gardens or space to play. Parents are more likely to have lower levels of education, and less knowledge of the education system (Hillman 1996, 4-5). As Conaty (2002, 19) puts it, 'it is unlikely that children can benefit from the educational system if the family is just surviving.'

Three forms of cultural capital have been identified, according to Kellaghan (2001). All three forms are family or parent related. In the first form, past

experience, especially within the family, is used to organize future experience. Possessions such as books and dictionaries comprise the second form, and educational qualifications are an example of the third form (Kellaghan 2001).

This concept of *cultural capital* is a very important component of the discourse on educational disadvantage. Much of the debate is based on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital.

> Cultural capital usually refers to socialization into highbrow cultural activities …He (Bourdieu) contended that children from high socioeconomic backgrounds are more often exposed to highbrow cultural activities at home and that those who acquire cultural capital at home are more likely to do well in school and subsequently to have better chances of achieving high levels of schooling than others.
>
> (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp   1996, 22)

Sui-Chu and Willms (1996, 127) explain that, 'according to this thesis,

schools are largely middle-class institutions with middle-class values, organizational patterns, and forms of communication' and that 'children who are raised in middle-class environments have a form of cultural capital that enables them to adapt more readily to and to benefit from school life.' Translating this into the reality of school life, Comer (1991, 186) claims that for children from 'society's mainstream' there is little discontinuity between the learning expectations of home and school. Parents on the margin, states Comer, cannot give their children the experiences to enable them to do well in school, even when they want educational success for their children. It is Crozier's view (1997, 193) that working-class parents are less endowed with cultural capital than middle-class parents, 'particularly with respect to educational knowledge such as in terms of how the education system works.'

Crozier contends that one needs to know what one wants from the education system and one needs to have the skills to get this for one's children. 'Working-class parents tend not to have this cultural capital,' states Crozier (1997, 195).

The language that parents pass on to their children is another form of cultural capital. The work of Bernstein (1964), who introduced the terms, 'elaborated code' with relation to language usage in middle-class homes and 'restricted code' in relation to language usage in working-class homes, is important in this context. The deficit theory of language usage has been critiqued and rejected by other writers (e.g., Drudy and Lynch 1993, Moll 1992, Tizard and Hughes 1984). Nash (2001, 197), however, contends that children, who by the age of five have become 'sensitised by the differential linguistic and cognitive socialisation they have experienced,' respond to school in varying ways depending on their acquisition of language codes. 'Whereas some are able to recognize and respond to the discourse of school in ways that facilitate their learning, meet with institutional reward, and promote the emergence of a positive self-concept, others are left in a rather different situation' (Nash 2001, 197). Cregan (2008) writes of a case study of four Irish schools, three designated as disadvantaged and one in a middle-class setting. The study explored 'the link between social class, facility in "literate" style language, and children's literacy development' (Cregan 2008, 13). The findings indicate 'less frequent use of "literate" style in children's patterns of oral language' in the disadvantaged schools and 'an acute awareness by children of the different patterns of language use valued by school' (Cregan 2008, 13). Cregan (2008,

13) states that the latter research highlights the need to raise teachers' awareness of language variation and its implications for academic and literacy success and that the study recommends that 'in relation to language variation difference need not necessarily mean disadvantage.'

Social capital has been shown to affect educational outcomes (Coleman (1987, 1988). According to Haghighat (2005, 215), social capital 'refers to social networks available to parents that enhance a pupil's ability to benefit from educational opportunities.' 'In most definitions, social capital is considered to be embedded in relationships between individuals in informal social networks' (Kellaghan 2001, 10). Kellaghan suggests that, because of their membership of networks, people are able to acquire benefits, e.g., the development of shared aspirations, mutual aid and support and the exchange of information. Cullen (2000, 15) argues that, 'within the family, future educational attainment is linked not only to current educational levels and parental income but also to social capital.' Quoting Coleman (1988), he states that if parents' education 'is not complemented by social capital, embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth' (Cullen 2000, 15). Cullen believes that parents' social-capital value is diminished when they spend less time interacting with their children's school friends or other associates or when they do not know or interact with their children's teachers. They enhance their social-capital value 'when they form parents' organizations and participate in self-help, network groups and other activities of a social, developmental and educational nature' (Cullen 2000, 15).

Researchers from different ideological perspectives have commented on the deficit view of educational disadvantage. Cairney (2000) suggests that there are two types of deficit views of the relationship between home and school. The first, which he styles 'family deficit explanations,' 'are based on the faulty assumption that school achievement varies for some students because their families lack the specific skills to enable them to create an environment of support that will enable their children to succeed at school' (Cairney 2000, 165). The second, which he calls 'educational inadequacy,' suggests that varying educational outcomes for children stem from schools' failure to develop student strengths and abilities (Cairney 2000). The deficit theory, or, as Derman-Sparks (2002, 61) terms it, 'cultural deprivation thinking,' stems from a highly complex network of relationships. Lynch (1999, 296) sees the deficit view as a product of 'a highly unequal society,' positing that, while remaining 'blind to the discrimination' that lies within institutions, the causes of inequality are sought within 'personal character and individual attributes' rather than 'within the sets of social, economic, cultural and political relations which operate between these "attribute-bearing" individuals' (Lynch 1999, 297).

CMRS reminds us that educational disadvantage 'is now seen as 'evidence of different rather than deficient lifestyles' (Education Commission of The Conference of Major Religious Superiors 1992, 9). As Cairney (2000, 166) points out, 'there are differences between people based on class, race and even culture, and such differences are associated with different relationships with the curriculum in schools.' Speaking of children from disadvantaged areas, the SERC Report (Government of Ireland 1993, 144) contends that 'it would

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appear that the environment which such children encounter strongly influences the development of certain personal characteristics which make it difficult for them to adjust to the school environment.' Gilligan (2007, 45), speaking of the children and young people who are 'failed by the current education system,' holds that 'an exclusive focus on the negative differences that influence their lives can fail to acknowledge their potential and their resilience.' Hyland (2005, 3) reminds us that 'the focus is on recognizing and accommodating diversity in a positive sense' but Cairney (2000, 166) believes that schools have 'done better at acknowledging than responding to difference.'

2.2.4 Views in Irish research literature on ways to address educational disadvantage

The 1993 SERC Report acknowledges that 'the physical, psychological and social needs of disadvantaged children are identical to other children and their innate potential may not be inferior in any way' (Government of Ireland 1993, 144). While accepting that disadvantaged children enter the school system with knowledge and skills which 'form an unsatisfactory basis for learning in a school setting,' the Report contends that 'the situation is exacerbated, if the school is unable to adjust sufficiently to meet the special needs of these pupils, by organizing itself and what happens in it in a flexible, more adaptable way' (Government of Ireland 1993, 144). The Report states that difficulties arise because many of the skills that the children have acquired 'are not those which schools expect pupils to have acquired on entry and on which ordinary school

curricula are based' (Government of Ireland 1993, 145). Some writers (e.g., INTO 1994, Lynch 1999) hold the view that the education system serves to reinforce or even to exacerbate the inequalities existing in society. Conaty (2002, 180) states that 'the alteration of school structures and practices, a more enlightened and positive way of viewing both marginalised pupils and their families and effective schooling are called for.' Spring (2007, 8) believes that 'a radical shift in how we approach tackling educational disadvantage requires a fundamental restructuring of the education system.'

Early intervention is seen as an essential strategy to address educational disadvantage (Donnelly 2007, INTO 2004, McGough 2007). Some writers recommend focusing on literacy and numeracy and the way schools teach these subjects (Dooley and Corcoran 2007, Mullan and Travers 2007). Collaborative vision-building, shared problem-solving and an ethos of power-sharing are recommended by other writers (Derman-Sparks and Fite 2007, Higgins 2007, Higgins, Tobin and Harte 2008).

Taking the totality of advice available from writers/researchers in the field, a two-pronged approach is recommended. The first prong is school-focused and is based on 'recognition of the fact that schools, through their procedures and ethos, contribute to educational disadvantage' (Conference of Major Religious Superiors 1992, 11). The second prong is the partnership approach and this has vital implications for the inclusion of parents. This approach is seen as the way forward by most observers, researchers and writers in the field today (e.g., Cullen 2000, Government of Ireland 1993). The theoretical framework for this

approach is that educational disadvantage is linked directly to 'the social and economic characteristics of the community where the school is located or the child lives' (Cullen 2000, 8). Cullen (2000) sees partnership structures focusing on promoting parental involvement in education as contributing to building social capital in the community. The Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage, set up in 1996 by the Combat Poverty Agency, acknowledged 'the need to address educational disadvantage by intervening as much with the systems surrounding children as with children themselves' (Cullen 2000, 8). It recognized that 'interventions needed to go beyond "conventional schooling"' and 'emphasised the value of achieving more effective home-school-community linkages and, in particular, of promoting and developing the roles of non-school community bodies and parents in tackling children's educational needs' (Cullen 2000, 7). Inherent in this approach is the recommendation that services catering for disadvantaged populations should be coordinated and integrated (Kellaghan 2002, Hyland 2002, Zappone 2007).

2.2.5 Action taken by the DES to combat disadvantage at primary school level: Policy and practice with specific reference to parent-school partnership

Significant emphasis has been placed on addressing educational inclusion issues, especially since the late 1980s (Department of Education and Science 2005). This section will outline DES policy and practice with specific reference to parental involvement. It is important to note that important initiatives to address educational disadvantage have been undertaken outside of the DES. Examples of initiatives other than DES initiatives are the *Bridging the Gap*

Project (Deane 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) (described in Chapter One), the establishment of the *Targeting Educational Disadvantage* Project (hereinafter TED) in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, in 1997 and the establishment of the Educational Disadvantage Centre in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, in 2001. According to TED's mission statement, the project 'seeks to harness and develop the strengths and resources of Mary Immaculate College to enable those experiencing educational disadvantage to reach their full potential' (Ryan, Higgins, Bourke and Considine 2008, 5). Amongst the strands of TED work is a strand encompassing primary school networks. Work in the schools includes developing partnerships between families, schools and communities (Ryan and Galvin 2008, 15). The mission of the Educational Disadvantage Centre is 'to promote equality in education and to contribute to the shaping of primary teacher education, so that the cycle of educational disadvantage is broken' (Educational Disadvantage Centre 2008).

In this section, DES policy relating to educational disadvantage and parent-school partnership will be outlined first, followed by a brief outline of the initiatives introduced to primary schools, with specific reference to the fostering of parent-school partnership.

2.2.5.1 Policy relating to educational disadvantage with specific reference to parent-school partnership

Conaty (2002, 36) contends that the role given to parents by the Irish Government Department of Education is 'of paramount importance.' We will now look at the role of parent-school partnership in policy documents relating

to educational disadvantage produced by the Irish Government. These documents date from 1990, when the first criteria for identifying educational disadvantage were laid down by the Irish Government and will be addressed in their chronological order, showing the historical development.

CMRS notes the strategy emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, which embraces the concept of partnerships through community education leading to empowerment for those experiencing poverty (Education Commission of The Conference of Major Religious Superiors 1992). This concept of partnership underpins all government policy relating to educational disadvantage in recent times. This strategy acknowledges that educational disadvantage cannot be eliminated by schools working in isolation and, to attain this objective, schools must work collaboratively with families and other agencies in the community (Education Commission of The Conference of Major Religious Superiors 1992, xxii). CMRS continues:

> The most obvious feature of a partnership approach in operation is its emphasis on increasing the involvement of parents in the education of their own children. This is done by promoting the parents' educational role as equal and complementary to that of the teacher.

The 1992 Green Paper on Education, *Education for a Changing World,* saw home/school links as 'especially important in areas with a high degree of disadvantage' (Government of Ireland 1992, 46) and recommended that 'such contacts should commence at as early a stage as possible in the child's education' (Government of Ireland 1992, 47).

The 1994 National Education Convention recommended that, where pre-primary interventions were put in place in disadvantaged areas, 'such pre-school interventions should be closely linked to both the family/community and the school' (Convention Secretariat 1994, 108). The Convention (Convention Secretariat 1994, 115) recommended 'rapid expansion' of the HSCL Scheme to disadvantaged schools outside of disadvantaged areas. It stated:

> Such Home-School-Community Liaison programmes should be closely linked to adult/community education schemes running in the communities concerned, so that parents and the community are empowered, and more confident to deal effectively with the education of their children.
> (Convention Secretariat 1994, 115)

The Convention also saw as necessary 'a co-ordinated plan of intervention for families and children who are seriously disadvantaged, initially in disadvantaged areas, then disadvantaged schools' (Convention Secretariat 1994, 115).

The Irish Government White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future*, acknowledged the importance of developing 'dynamic and supportive links between the home and the school' (Government of Ireland 1995, 141). It recognized that 'those most disadvantaged in society are least able to exercise their rights as parents' and deemed that 'measures directed specifically towards disadvantaged communities are necessary to avoid increasing the gap of inequality through socio-economic differences' (Government of Ireland 1995, 141).

The Irish Constitution (Article 42.1) recognizes the parent as the primary educator and the right of parents to be partners in their children's education was

established on a statutory basis by the Education Act, 1998. The section of the Act on educational disadvantage (Section 32) required the Minister for Education to establish a committee following consultation with parents and a number of other key players. This committee, The Educational Disadvantage Committee, was launched by the Minister in 2002 and was to have a three-year term of office. During its term, the Committee made four submissions to the Minister for Education and Science and published a Report on the Educational Disadvantage Forum (Hyland 2005, 1). One of the seven elements deemed in the Report to 'constitute a precisely targeted, comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to addressing disadvantage in a school context' is 'a high degree of parent involvement in the educational process' (Hyland 2005, 3).

The Education Welfare Act (2000) placed a statutory obligation on parents with regard to school attendance. Section 17 of this Act states that 'the parent of a child shall cause the child concerned to attend a recognized school on each school day' and that, 'where a parent fails or neglects their duties as prescribed under the Act, that parent shall be guilty of an offence which may result in a fine being imposed or imprisonment' (Government of Ireland 2000).

A document entitled, *Looking at our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools*, published by the DES Inspectorate in 2003, contains a section on provision for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schools are asked to reflect both on the principles underlying their provision of support for such children and on the actual provision itself. Amongst the other measures considered is 'the support given to parents of pupils from such backgrounds, and other stakeholders, to participate in the operation of the school, and the

way that participation is facilitated' (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003, 35).

In DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools): An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, the DES acknowledges 'the vital role of parents as the prime educators of their children' (Department of Education and Science 2005, 38). This five-year action plan (2005-2010) 'focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education' (Department of Education and Science 2005, 15). The document promises that a renewed emphasis will be placed on the involvement of parents and families in children's education in schools during the life of the action plan (Department of Education and Science 2005).

2.2.5.2 <u>Initiatives introduced by the Irish Government to address educational disadvantage at primary level, with particular reference to parent-school partnership</u>

Many initiatives have been introduced by the Irish Government to address educational disadvantage at primary level. Information on these initiatives can be accessed on the DES website (www.education.ie). The most important initiatives from the point of view of parent-school partnership will now be presented. These initiatives will be presented in chronological order.

Prior to the mid-1980s, little focused attention was given by the Irish Government to addressing educational disadvantage. One exception to this was the Rutland Street Pre-School Project, set up in an inner-city school in Dublin

in 1969. Parental involvement, along with a structured curriculum and an emphasis on cognitive objectives, was an important component of the project, which aimed to offset 'the effects of social disadvantage and the consequent difficulties in the transition from home to primary school by providing the pupils with experiences to enhance their overall development' (Murphy 2000, 9).

The Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage was introduced in 1984 (Department of Education and Science 2008b). Schools in the scheme were given additional financial support in the form of enhanced capitation grants. These could be used for management and running costs, for purchasing books, materials and equipment and to develop home-school links (Murphy 2000). Schools were able to avail of finance to launch book rental schemes to ease the financial burden on parents (Murphy 2000). Schools in the scheme were also granted ex-quota concessionary teaching posts.

In the 1990/1991 school year, the first major initiative designed to promote parental partnership was introduced. In that school year, the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme was initiated in schools designated as disadvantaged. This scheme has been described in Chapter One (pp. 14-16).

The National Educational Psychological Service (hereinafter NEPS) was set up as a pilot service in 1990 and became permanent in 1994 (Murphy 2000). Previously, the corresponding service was provided by the inspectorate to which suitably qualified personnel were appointed for the purpose. NEPS

specializes in working with the school community and works in partnership with teachers, parents and children in identifying educational needs (Department of Education and Science 2008f). Each psychologist is assigned to a number of schools and works with parents and teachers to devise programmes to meet children's educational needs. NEPS has an information page for parents on the DES website (www.education.ie).

Early Start, a pre-school intervention programme for children deemed to be at risk of educational disadvantage, was set up in 40 primary schools in 1994 (Department of Education and Science 2008c). *Early Start* 'aims to expose young children to an educational programme, which will enhance their overall development and seeks to maximise these children's potential for achievement within the primary school system' (Murphy 2000, 9). Parents are involved in *Early Start* centres 'from participation in everyday management to organization of activities' (Murphy 2000, 10).

In 1996, *Breaking the Cycle* was introduced to 33 urban and 122 rural primary schools following a report commissioned by the Combat Poverty Agency for the Department of Education (Department of Education and Science 2008d). This programme 'marked the formal introduction of positive discrimination in favour of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, with a specific focus on large-scale urban disadvantage and for the first time a focus on rural and dispersed disadvantage' (Murphy 2000, 12). The scheme provided for extra funding and a pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1 in the first four years of primary schooling. Grant (2000, 3) notes that, in schools in *Breaking the Cycle*, 'a wide

variety of activities has been designed by the schools to promote parental involvement and partnership and, as a result, parents are especially supportive of the work of the school and are active participants in the life and work of the schools.' This is in keeping with the proposal in the Combat Poverty Report that the programme would contain 'a high degree of parent involvement in the educational process (both in their own homes and in the schools)' (Kellaghan et al. 1995, 66).

The *Giving Children an Even Break* Programme was introduced in 2001 (Department of Education and Science 2008e). Schools did not have to be in an area of social and economic disadvantage to avail of the programme. Resources were allocated to schools based on the level of concentration in each school of pupils with background characteristics associated with educational disadvantage and early school leaving (Department of Education and Science 2008e). These resources included a reduced pupil-teacher ratio for junior classes and financial resources. Schools in the scheme were required to put measures in place to support and involve parents in their children's education (Department of Education and Science 2008e).

The National Educational Welfare Board, established under the Education Welfare Act (2000), was put in place in 2002 and has a statutory function to ensure that every child receives an education (National Education Welfare Board 2008). The ethos of the Board is to get to the root of problems behind non-attendance rather that admonishing children and parents (National Education Welfare Board 2008). Part of the Education Welfare Officers' role is to support parents.

The DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Action Plan is being implemented in schools over a five-year period, 2005-2010 (Department of Education and Science 2005). As stated in Chapter One (p.13), the aim of DEIS is 'to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people in disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed' (Department of Education and Science 2005, 9). A core element of DEIS, the School Support Programme (SSP), has been described in Chapter One (pp. 13-14). Existing schemes, including *Early Start*, *Giving Children an Even Break*, the HSCL Scheme, the School Completion Programme and the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme are being integrated into the SSP on a phased basis over the five-year implementation period of the plan. One of the main objectives of the plan is 'to build on the successful work of the HSCL Scheme over the past 15 years' (Department of Education and Science 2005, 40). The action plan places 'a renewed emphasis' (p. 40) on parental and family involvement in education and schools are required to 'incorporate the Home/School/Community Liaison function as part of their three-year action plans' (Department of Education and Science 2005, 40). Specific actions to be taken include the continuation of the work of HSCL Coordinators in supporting parents in developing their children's literacy and numeracy skills and very young children's oral language skills, building on existing strategies to improve parental involvement at middle and senior primary level as well as at second-level and increasing the level of integration between the primary and second-level elements of the scheme (Department of Education and Science 2005).

2.2.6   Parent-school partnership in Ireland and educational disadvantage

International literature provides evidence that parents of lower-economic status become involved in their children's schooling to a lesser extent than their more affluent counterparts (e.g., Finders and Lewis 1994, Harris and Ranson 2005, Phtiaka 1994, Todd and Higgins 1998, Vogels 2002).

We will now consider the evidence regarding the trends of parent-school partnership in an Irish context.

In an evaluation on the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme undertaken in 1995 some teachers surveyed considered that 'parents with social or economic difficulties, parents with literacy problems, parents of troublesome children or of ones that were frequently absent from school, parents who lacked confidence in themselves' were not involved (Ryan 1995, 22). Coordinators surveyed in the same evaluation were conscious of the need to target these parents, recognizing that they required additional forms of support and that, only when their immediate problems had been addressed, could they be expected to become involved in activities related to their children's education. The findings of interviews conducted with uninvolved mothers 'needing help,' as opposed to uninvolved mothers deemed not to need help, in six selected primary schools in the scheme, showed that these parents were less likely to have read to their child when younger, less likely to read themselves, less likely to talk to their child about something seen on television or that had been read and less likely to check the child's television viewing or reading. Significantly, these parents were more likely to perceive that their child was doing less well

than other children at school, to feel they could not help their child with homework and to expect their child to leave school at a younger age (Ryan 1995).

A study undertaken by Mac Giolla Phádraig (2003) found that, of the schools surveyed, those which held disadvantage status were less likely to have a Parents' Association than schools which did not hold disadvantage status. Similarly, most principals surveyed, in an evaluation by the DES Inspectorate of literacy and numeracy in disadvantaged schools, 'referred to a lack of parents' involvement in their children's schooling, and some parents were described as being apathetic and indifferent to their children's education' (Department of Education and Science 2005a). This evaluation report concludes that, 'in the majority of school settings parental involvement remains poor, particularly in the case of parents of children in the middle and senior classes' (Department of Education and Science 2005a, 63). The HSCL Scheme is considered, by principals and teachers surveyed for this DES Inspectorate evaluation, to play an important role in promoting parental involvement in the work of schools, with class teachers commenting that the scheme was 'an effective support in encouraging parents of younger children to become involved in literacy' (Department of Education and Science 2005a, 30). While the principals surveyed seemed to be critical of the level of parental involvement, it is noted that, amongst the recommendations made in this report, the onus is very clearly placed on schools, which 'should explore ways of supporting parents in becoming more fully involved in the education of their children' (Department of Education and Science 2005a, 66). In conclusion, the

report states that 'quality strategic planning will concentrate on the role of parents, teachers and schools in maximizing the potential the curriculum has to offer' (Department of Education and Science 2005a, 68).

2.2.6.1 <u>Outcomes of parent-school partnership on educational disadvantage</u>

Walser (2005) sounds a note of caution when she reminds us of the difficulty of measuring the effects of parental support on school performance, given the number of variables involved. This statement is true also in the case of assessing the effects of parent-school partnership on educational disadvantage. What exactly are the desired outcomes? These outcomes could be in the form of increased confidence for parents, greater involvement by parents in decision-making, in classrooms or with their children's homework, less absenteeism or early school leaving or enhanced communication between home and school. The results of studies demonstrating the effects of involving parents of children at risk of educational disadvantage vary. Many show positive outcomes (e.g., Burch 1993, Comer 1991). Other studies are less positive (e.g., Driessen et al. 2005) with Toomey (1989) demonstrating how home-school relation policies can actually increase educational inequality by conferring advantage on children of involved parents, thereby increasing the advantage/disadvantage gap.

The most important Irish partnership initiative in designated disadvantaged schools is the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme (described in Chapter One, pp. 14-16). The outcomes of this scheme will now be examined, from the viewpoint of schools, parents and teachers.

In a 1995 evaluation of the scheme (Ryan 1995), the impact of the scheme on schools, parents and pupils was noted. In most schools, the number of parents interacting with teachers increased during the first three years of the scheme, some teachers who had initially resisted parent involvement in the classroom now welcomed it and there was an increased understanding by teachers of parents' backgrounds and the difficulties encountered by them. In a 2003 evaluation by Archer and Shortt, over 90% of both principals and coordinators surveyed deemed that the HSCL Scheme had achieved its stated aim 'to promote active cooperation between home, school and community' (Archer and Shortt 2003, 79).

Ryan (1995) reported in her 1995 evaluation that parents found it easier to approach teachers as a result of the scheme and parents' personal development, self-confidence, parenting skills and home management skills were perceived to have benefited from participation in the scheme. In a large majority of schools, parents' attitudes towards involvement in the school were considered to have become more positive. Parents developed a new interest in the workings of schools, came to the school more frequently, talked more about educational issues and had a greater awareness of the classroom situation. Parents became aware of the importance of their role in their children's education, felt comfortable about helping their children with homework following their own attendance at courses, with some of them feeling confident enough to help in the classroom. In Ryan's 1995 evaluation, over two-thirds of involved parents reported that, as a result of their involvement in courses, they

had learned how to help their children with school learning. In 1999, Ryan reported that 'parents had increased in self-confidence, knew more about what was happening in school, and had learned how to help their children with schoolwork' (Ryan 1999, 31).

A 2003 evaluation of HSCL by Archer and Shortt found that a majority of coordinators and principals consider that parents feel less threatened by schools and teachers as a result of the scheme, are more involved in their children's schoolwork, have learned new parenting skills and are more aware of their contribution to their children's education (Archer and Shortt 2003).

The above data provides positive evidence of the impact of HSCL on parental partnership, even though, as noted above (p. 63), in some cases the most disadvantaged parents may still not be involved.

Ryan (1995) notes that limited information is available on the effects of HSCL on pupils. Pupil outcomes were noted by coordinators in Ryan's (1995) evaluation. Ryan stresses that these outcomes are for 'some' pupils, sometimes as few as one or two pupils with whom the coordinator or another staff member had intervened directly. Outcomes included 'improved behaviour, improved attendance, improved scholastic achievement, greater care in their school work, and more positive attitudes to school and teachers, to themselves, and to their parents' (Ryan 1995, 25). Few teachers saw any effects on the pupils' scholastic outcomes as a result of the scheme but felt that such effects would take longer to emerge (Ryan 1995).

A 1999 evaluation of the scheme by Ryan contained analysis of reading and mathematics scores on standardized tests completed by Third and Fifth Class pupils following five years inclusion by schools in the HSCL Scheme. Gains were found for the Third Class but not the Fifth Class pupils (Ryan 1999).

Archer and Shortt note, in their 2003 evaluation, that HSCL Coordinators and school principals seem to regard the scheme as less successful in achieving its aims relating to pupil outcomes than it is in relation to aims in other areas. They also found that 'what might be regarded as affective outcomes (pupils' attitude to and experience of school) are described as having occurred to a greater extent … than are outcomes relating to pupils' behaviour, attendance or performance' (Archer and Shortt 2003, 91).

2.3 <u>Parental involvement in Irish primary education: History, evolution and current status</u>

2.3.1 Parental involvement in Irish primary education: History and evolution

The word 'involvement' was chosen in preference to 'partnership' in the title of this section as the concept of parental partnership in Irish education is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Ó'Buachalla (1988, 49) uses the term, 'binary model,' to describe the major influences of Churches and State on the development of Irish educational policy. Speaking of the dominance of Church and State in Irish education after

the establishment of the national school system in 1831, the Irish National Teachers' Organization (hereinafter INTO) asserts that 'parents, teachers, pupils and others figured little in the symbiotic accommodation arrived at by both churches and state' (INTO 1997, 1). This is in no way to devalue the enormous contribution made by the Churches to Irish education, a contribution acknowledged by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 1997). At the start of the twenty-first century, the situation has changed enormously as we shall see. Change has come about slowly, however, with Conaty commenting in 2002 that 'it would appear, from speaking to parents and school personnel, and from research findings, that the participation of parents is often consigned to their having a merely peripheral role' (Conaty 2002, 34).

Farry (1998, 1), writing of vocational education, reminds us that 'even before St. Patrick there were specific legal provisions relating to syllabi, and to teachers' and that the earliest written provision for Irish vocational education is contained in the Brehon Laws. Coolahan (1981) traces the history of Irish education, noting that, prior to educational developments in the nineteenth century, 'Ireland had long had an honourable tradition of concern and regard for education perhaps most notably reflected in the great monastic schools which served as "lights of the north" during Europe's dark ages, and the bardic schools which helped to preserve and transmit much of the cultural heritage of the people' (Coolahan 1981, 8). Coolahan (1981, 3) refers to 'a new and quickening pulse of concern … in relation to education' in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a result of events such as the industrial

revolution, rising population, increasing urbanization, the political and social values occurring as a result of the French revolution and changing conceptions of childhood linked to the romantic movement. Coolahan (1981, 3-4) observes that Ireland was frequently used as 'a social laboratory where various policy initiatives were tried out which might be less acceptable in England' and that 'Ireland, as a colony, could be used as an experimental milieu for social legislation which might not be tolerated in England.' Furthermore, the British Government saw schools as institutions that could promote political loyalty and cultural assimilation (Coolahan 1981, 4). Against this backdrop, a state-supported primary school system was established in 1831, administered by an appointed National Board of Education in Dublin and managed by prominent people in the community, usually clergymen (Titley 1983).

Though it was the State's hope that the new primary school system would be non-denominational, 'each denomination strove to shape the national school system towards its denominational requirements' (Coolahan 1981, 5). Titley (1983, 4) speaks of the strong bond between priests and people which developed during the struggle for Catholic emancipation, and of the fact that, even after emancipation had been achieved, the Church's cause continued to be championed by clergy, not laity, and 'this was conspicuously so with regard to the question of education.' Moreover, at this time, an educated middle class did not exist in Ireland (Titley 1983), but was emerging. As the nineteenth century progressed, the situation remained unchanged. Steele (1999, 134) argues that 'in post-famine Ireland, the Catholic Church was leader of, and spokesperson for, a people disorganised and demoralised by years of death and decline.'

Citing Hyland (1995, 42), he states that, effectively, the Church acted in *loco parentis* on behalf of its people for almost a century especially in the field of education, and that, having done this for so long and with, as far as could be judged, the consent of 'the overwhelming majority of its people,' the Church continued to carry out this role decades after independence (Steele 1999, 134).

With the adoption of the Irish Constitution in 1937, the predominant role of parents in their children's education was acknowledged:

> The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children. (Article 42.1)

Article 42.2 goes on to state that 'parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.' Furthermore, 'the State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State' (Government of Ireland 1937, Article 42.3). Steele (1999, 133), quoting from documents such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Code of Canon Law,* reminds us that Articles 41 and 42 of the Irish Constitution, providing for the family and education, 'are profoundly influenced by the social teachings of the Catholic Church' which 'insist that the parents are the primary educators of their children and, as such, possess rights and duties of the most fundamental and perduring kind.' These Church documents post-date the Constitution but, in this matter, they enshrine traditional Catholic doctrine. In spite of this acknowledgement by both Church and State of the rights of parents in their children's education, 'neither has been quick to establish

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mechanisms by means of which the rights thus recognized in theory can be vindicated in practice' (Steele 1999, 44). Éamonn deValera (quoted in Ó'Buachalla 1988, 320), in reply to a written query from a New York educationalist in 1953 concerning the extent of parental participation in school activities, wrote:

> There are few parent associations as such and parent participation in school activities is therefore usually in accordance with the desires of individual parents in this respect. The Constitution of Ireland however, lays down that the primary rights and responsibilities in education are those of the parents and our system of education is based throughout on this principle.

It is not until the 1960s that there is any evidence of a stated intention by the State to actively involve parents in their children's education. Coolahan (1981, 131) comments that, compared with previous decades, 'the period 1960-1980 witnessed a dramatic increase in government and public interest in education,' noting that the publication in 1958 of the government White Paper on Economic Expansion was a notable landmark in the educational change which subsequently occurred. Coolahan (1981, 131) contends that this White Paper led to changed attitudes to economic and industrial development and that 'it was felt that a society needs to draw on the full potential of its pool of talent' with many commentators remarking that 'existing educational provision was not facilitating that.' Coolahan (1981) explains that attitudinal changes were occurring in Ireland during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a result of Ireland's expanding links with international organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO, as well as the introduction of television in 1961. Around this time, Ireland experienced 'the breakdown of the old paternalist ethos which tended to confine educational policy to the authority figures,

church and state' and 'a greater tolerance and more scope for the expression of group and individual opinion by teachers, parents and students was in evidence' (Coolahan 1981, 132).

In 1969, a booklet, *Ar nDaltaí Uile* (i.e., All Our Pupils)*,* was issued by the Department of Education to all homes in Ireland outlining the impending changes in Irish education (INTO 1997, 5). Shortly afterwards, in 1971, the new curriculum document circulated to primary schools put a responsibility on principal teachers to 'foster in conjunction with the manager, a proper liaison between the school and the home' (Department of Education 1971, 21). The Irish National Teachers' Organization (INTO 1997, 5) points out that, while the document did not 'go on to lay down clearly how this objective was to be achieved,' it was 'an indication of forthcoming change.'

Boards of Management in Irish primary schools were established in 1975, ensuring 'a wider participation by trustees, parents and teachers in the shared management of schools' (Conaty 2002, 34). Schools of up to six teachers were to have two parent representatives on the Board of Management out of a total of six members, with schools of seven teachers or more having Boards consisting of eight members with two parent representatives.

In 1985, the Minister for Education issued a circular (Department of Education 1985, Circular 7/85) announcing the setting up of a National Parents' Council and urging school authorities to have parents' associations formed in their schools.

Circular 7/88 (Department of Education 1988) related to the development of Codes of Discipline in schools and enshrined 'for the first time the right of parents to be involved in the drawing up and approving of the content of any school's code' (Cúram 1989).

1984 saw the beginnings of a movement to provide multi-denominational schooling with the establishment of Educate Together. According to its website, Educate Together 'guarantees children and parents of all faiths and none equal respect in the operation and governing of education' (Educate Together 2008). Educate Together primary schools, of which there are forty-four as of July 2008, are fully recognized by the DES and operate under the same regulations and funding structures as other national schools (Educate Together 2008). Educate Together schools are 'democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school, whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers' (Educate Together 2008). Educate Together asserts that this democratic organization and governance 'maximises the potential for building a genuine partnership between the professional, objective role of the teacher and the necessarily personal involvement of the parent in contributing to their children's education' (Educate Together 2008).

In 1988, the Primary Education Review Body was established, with two representatives from the National Parents' Council amongst its twenty-two members. The *Report of the Primary Education Review Body* (Government of

Ireland 1990) was published in 1990 and it is in this Report that we find the first comprehensive, clearly enunciated government statement on parental partnership. Recognizing the fundamental importance of relationships between home and school, the Report stated that, at that time, parents had 'moved away from a peripheral role' and were 'becoming more actively involved with teachers and clergy in management structures and policy making' (Government of Ireland 1990, 39). The Report stipulated that parents should be seen as 'interested partners in the education process' and that they should be consulted and 'have a significant influence on national educational policy and on its local implementation' (Government of Ireland 1990, 39). The Report recommended that home/school links should be established as soon as children are accepted for enrolment in a school and that 'all schools have a clearly defined policy and programme for productive parental involvement' (Government of Ireland 1990, 40).

The Report was followed in 1991 by a government circular (Department of Education 1991, Circular 24/91) to Chairpersons of Boards of Management of National Schools entitled *Parents as Partners in Education.* Asserting that 'partnership for parents in education is a stated policy aim of the Government,' the circular stated that 'the Government and the Social Partners have formally recognized the promotion of parental involvement in the education of their children as an essential strategy of educational policy and practice.' The circular was 'concerned with ensuring that partnership for parents is positively pursued at a local level by each national school.' It acknowledged parents' right 'to be assured that the child's needs are being met by the school' and stated that

'parents should be given as much information as possible on all aspects of the child's progress and development.' The main thrust of the circular was to request schools to set up a Parents' Association where none existed. Each national school was required 'to establish as part of its overall school policy/plan, a clearly defined policy for productive parental involvement.' While the circular did not define 'partnership,' it promised to draw up and issue guidelines to schools on the process of parental involvement.

1990 heralded a major advancement in the Government's commitment to home/school partnership with the introduction of the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) on a pilot basis in fifty-five primary schools in designated areas of disadvantage. At the end of a three-year pilot scheme, HSCL was mainstreamed at both primary and post-primary levels (Department of Education and Science 2007). This was a significant milestone as it was an acknowledgment by the Government of the centrality of home/school liaison in addressing educational disadvantage.

The Green Paper on Education, *Education for a Changing World* (Government of Ireland 1992), reiterated the importance of the promotion of home/school links. While the earlier *Report of the Primary Education Review Body* (Government of Ireland 1990) recommended establishing effective links from the child's enrolment in primary school, the Green Paper stated that such contact (viz., between home and school) 'should commence at as early a stage as possible in the child's education,' proposing to begin to develop pre-school programmes as part of the HSCL Scheme.

The *Report of the Special Education Review Committee,* published in 1993, also recognized the central role of parents of children with special educational needs. The Report recommended that 'parents should be actively involved with the professionals in making a recommendation concerning their child's initial school placement' and that 'the implications of each alternative placement should be made plain to them in order to assist them in making an informed decision' (Government of Ireland 1993, 33).

A reading of developments between the late 1960s and early 1990s in the area of parental partnership with schools shows a positive and promising progression. Parental partnership in education had become a stated governmental aim and, to ensure that this stated aim was not merely rhetoric, schools were now requested to have Parents' Associations and required to have 'a clearly defined policy for productive parental involvement' (Department of Education 1991, Circular 24/91), parents were becoming involved in policy-making and were represented on Boards of Management and the HSCL Scheme had been established in areas of economic disadvantage. Though this constituted progress, the *Report on the National Education Convention* (Convention Secretariat 1994, 23) stated that 'the fundamental question' at that time (1994) was 'whether appropriate adjustments and adaptations can be made to bring the governance of schools into line with very changed economic, social and political circumstances, while respecting the rights of various involved parties and winning the allegiance of the relevant partners within school communities.' On the one hand, there were 'increasing demands for

more democratic participation' of parents and teachers in the governance of schools and, on the other hand, there were the Patrons/Trustees who wished 'to ensure that certain fundamental beliefs, values and culturally valuable practices' were 'effectively taught and learned/internalised' within the schools and who, in this sense, stood for or acted on behalf of 'a body … of people who wish their children to be educated within a particular religious, ethical or cultural tradition' (Convention Secretariat 1994, 24). The Report (Convention Secretariat 1994, 25) contended that, with more educated parents, who 'are more conscious of the constitutional prerogatives of parents than formerly, the older model of patron "acting on behalf of" such people' was 'coming under challenge.' In constructing 'a model of relationships between Trustee/Patron and management' the Convention (Convention Secretariat 1994, 29) considered it relevant that there would be 'a clearer specification of the functions of patronage and management, such that the interests of Trustee/Patron are protected and the concern for the greater democratisation of school management boards may be accommodated.' The Report stated that, at the time of its publication, the composition of Boards of Management remained 'a contentious issue,' with parents and teachers seeking equal representation with other partners on Boards. In the governance framework envisaged by the Convention, the Board would 'be equally representative of Patrons, teachers and parents' (Convention Secretariat 1994, 29). The Convention considered that 'a more pluralist society, with many emerging interest groups, may give rise to pressures for new forms of schooling in alignment with their interests' (Convention Secretariat 1994, 25).

Reflecting the changing face of Ireland through the 1990s, the Irish Government White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future* (Government of Ireland 1995, 3), took up the theme of pluralism, referring to it as one of 'a number of key considerations which should underpin the formulation and evaluation of educational policy and practice.' Another key consideration was partnership, which is even more important than pluralism in the context of the position of parents in education. Those listed in the White Paper as partners in education were parents, patrons/trustees/owners/governors, management bodies, teachers, the local community and the State. The White Paper recognized that parents have a right to active participation in their child's education. They also have a right 'as individuals to be consulted and informed on all aspects of the child's education' and a right 'as a group to be active participants in the education system at school, regional and national levels' (Government of Ireland 1995, 9). The White Paper went a step further than previous educational policy documents in that it clearly stated that parents also have responsibilities. 'Parents should nurture a learning environment, co-operate with and support the school and other educational partners, and fulfil their special role in the development of the child' (Government of Ireland 1995, 9).

Two pieces of legislation which followed gave statutory recognition to the rights and responsibilities of parents in education. The Education Act, 1998 enshrined in law the rights of parents in relation to their children's schooling while the Education Welfare Act 2000 (Government of Ireland 2000) clearly delineated their responsibilities.

The Education Act, 1998, is described in the long title as 'an act … to ensure that the education system … is conducted in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff, the community served by the school and the state.' In this Act, the rights of parents in matters educational are clearly laid down. Parents now have a statutory right to be consulted, both individually and as a body, depending on the context, by the Minister for Education, inspectors, patrons, trustees, managers, principals and teachers on matters such as health education (Article 9d), evaluation of the organization and operation of the school (Article 13:3), assessment of the educational needs of students (Article 13:3), preparation of the school plan (Article 21:3) and the setting of objectives for the school and the monitoring of those objectives (Article 23:2d). Under the Act, parents' rights to send their children to schools of their choice is safeguarded (Article 6e). Parents are entitled to information, for example, on policies relating to admission, expulsion and suspension (Article 15:2d), on matters relating to the operation and performance of the school (Article 20), and on the school plan (Article 21, 4). Parents have a right to access 'in the prescribed manner' to records kept by a school relating to their children's educational progress (Article 9g). Parents may inspect school accounts as they relate to monies provided by the Oireachtas (Article 18:2). Parents have a right to form Parents' Associations (Article 26:1).

Steele (1999, 136) makes the point that the Education Act, 1998 'does little more than afford statutory recognition to rights already possessed and exercised

by parents' and has 'little doubt' that 'the Act is not as radical as similar instruments in other European jurisdictions.' In spite of that, he heralds the Act as a positive step, asserting that 'the very fact that their rights are thus copper-fastened by statute is in itself a signal improvement for Irish parents and, at the very least, the Act is a "stepping-stone" to even greater improvements for them in the future' (Steele 1999, 137).

The Education Welfare Act, 2000 promotes school attendance and also makes provision for children educated in the home. (Article 42.2 of the Irish Constitution gives parents freedom to provide education for their children in their own homes.) The Act places a statutory obligation on parents to ensure that their child attends a recognized school (Article 17) and, where a parent neglects his/her duties under the Act, he/she will be guilty of an offence which may result in a fine being imposed or imprisonment (Article 25). Where a child is absent from a school where he/she is registered, the child's parent is required, under the Act, to notify the principal of the school of the reasons for the child's absence (Article 18). Parents may be asked, as a condition of registration, to confirm in writing that they accept and will support the school's code of behaviour (Article 23). Where parents are educating their children at home, they are required to register the child with the National Education Welfare Board, which has powers to establish that the child is receiving a certain minimum education (Article 14).

The Revised Curriculum, introduced to Irish primary schools in 1999, reflects both the spirit and statutory requirements of the Education Act, 1998. In the

introduction document (Government of Ireland 1999), partnership in education is listed as a key issue. This document acknowledges that significant educational, social and behavioural benefits accrue to the child as a result of effective home/school partnership. It stresses the necessity of regular consultation with parents in order to help teachers 'to come to a deeper appreciation of children's needs and so to plan more effective learning experiences' (Government of Ireland 1999, 22). Good communication between parents and schools is seen as a way of building 'a shared understanding of the principles of the curriculum, the learning goals of the school, and the approaches and methodologies it adopts' (Government of Ireland 1999, 22). Parental involvement in curricular planning is recommended and the special contribution parents can make 'in creating and fostering a positive school spirit' is acknowledged (Government of Ireland 1999, 22).

In 2000, the government issued *Learning Support Guidelines* (Government of Ireland 2000a), to Irish primary schools. This document aimed 'to provide practical guidance to teachers, parents and other interested persons on the provision of effective learning support to pupils with low achievement/learning difficulties' (Government of Ireland 2000a, 7). Both this document and the previously mentioned one illustrate the extent to which government thinking and policy on parental partnership has changed since the introduction of the 1971 curriculum (Department of Education 1971) when, in the curriculum document, parents got a brief mention. The *Learning Support Guidelines* document outlines very clearly the role of the principal in working with parents, the role of the class teacher in collaborating with parents of pupils in

receipt of supplementary teaching and the role of the learning-support teacher in consulting and collaborating with parents. The role of the parents in supporting the work of the school is comprehensively dealt with, as well as the role of parents in communicating with the school. For instance, the principal can facilitate parental involvement in the learning support process by establishing school policies and procedures that enable parents to become effectively involved in the provision of learning support and by encouraging the organization of information sessions for parents on issues relating to the school's learning support service (Government of Ireland 2000a, 40). Class teachers should make parents aware of the school's concerns about the child's progress and outline the school's practices regarding the administration of diagnostic tests (Government of Ireland 2000a, 45). The learning support teacher should outline to the parents the learning targets set by the school for the child as well as ways the parents can support those targets at home (Government of Ireland 2000a, 49). Parents should support the work of the school by engaging in activities, e.g., paired reading, and should keep teachers informed of the progress they observe in their child's learning or any learning difficulties they observe in their child (Government of Ireland 2000a, 53).

The INTO notes that, when the 1971 curriculum was introduced (Department of Education 1971), 'little if any meaningful reference' was made to the roles of teachers or parents in the 'process of home school liaison' (INTO 1997, 5). This charge certainly cannot be made against the Department of Education and Science since the Education Act, 1998 came into law. As already noted, parental partnership is seen as a crucial element of curriculum implementation

and school planning and specific ways of achieving this are outlined clearly by the Department of Education and Science in its documents (Government of Ireland 1999, Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003).

When a primary school needs to reflect on its overall implementation of parent-school partnership, it has yet another valuable source of information and guidance in the form of a further document, issued by the Inspectorate in 2003, entitled *Looking at our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003). This document is used as a basis for Whole School Evaluation (hereinafter WSE) (Department of Education and Science 2006) and anecdotal evidence suggests that DES Inspectors, carrying out WSE, question the Board of Management about parental involvement and seek objective evidence for such involvement. The document provides schools with a set of themes through which they may undertake a review and self-evaluation of their own performance. It is apparent yet again from this document that the Department of Education and Science is taking the statutory requirement laid down by the Education Act, 1998 with regard to parent-school partnership seriously. The document asks Boards of Management to consider the effectiveness of their procedures for ensuring meaningful communication with parents in all aspects of the school's operation. The first theme under the heading, 'Management of relationships with parents and the wider community,' is 'the quality of partnership with parents, and the degree to which the school facilitates contact between parents and teachers' (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003, 9). The remaining themes in this section are concerned with parent-teacher meetings,

parental involvement and communication between home and school. The school should look at the extent to which it 'engages in regular review, on a partnership basis, of its relationship with parents and the wider school community, including outside agencies' (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003, 9).

In the 2003 Inspectorate document, schools are asked to reflect on the extent to which they involve parents in the development of the school plan and on how they communicate the content of the school plan to parents. Other areas of reflection are the relative influence and involvement of parents in determining the needs and interests of pupils, the degree to which parents are facilitated and encouraged to respond to school reports and the nature and quality of liaison with parents in meeting the needs of pupils with physical and sensory disabilities and with behavioural and emotional problems. With regard to minority groups, the school is asked to consider the support it gives to parents of pupils from such backgrounds. An entire section in the document poses questions for schools in the area of provision for co-operation between school, home and community. The importance of school policy and documentation on co-operation between home, school and community is stressed here as well as the structures that exist to facilitate such co-operation. A further section deals with provision for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. (See this chapter, pp. 57-58, for comment on this.)

2.3.2   Current status of parent partnership in Irish primary schools

We have now established that huge change has taken place in government thinking and policy on parent-school partnership in the last three decades. We will now look at how this is reflected in schools and classrooms.

A document, entitled *Fifty School Reports: What Inspectors Say*, is based on an analysis of the findings of the Irish Schools Inspectorate from fifty school reports from a variety of primary schools during the 2001/2002 school year (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2002). This document outlines the state of parental involvement in these fifty schools, and may be indicative of parental involvement at the present time in Irish schools generally speaking, though it must be stressed that the document makes no claims in this regard.

This report found that more than half of the schools set aside time to discuss pupil progress with parents. Ways of communicating with parents include parent-teacher meetings, both formal and informal, written report cards, newsletters, bulletins and information booklets. It would seem that, amongst the fifty schools, communication with parents is efficient on the whole. Parents are less well catered for in terms of school involvement, with just a few schools encouraging 'active parental involvement in shared reading, in individual education plans for pupils with special needs and as classroom assistants supporting learning activities' (Department of Education and Science

Inspectorate 2002, 10). Less than half of the reports referred directly to parental involvement in school development planning, and this was noted as a concern by the Inspectorate. A further concern was the lack of effective communication between parents' associations and schools (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2002).

A national progress report on the School Development Planning Initiative (Department of Education and Science 2003a, 29) indicated that the inclusion of Boards of Management and parents in school development planning was most successful among schools in the third year of the initiative, with up to 33% of these schools involving parents in the planning process. The report notes that improvement in the involvement of parents in schools that had taken part in the initiative for just one or two years has been 'modest' and states that 'much remains to be done in this area.' Schools seem to be paying scant attention to the Department of Education and Science's recommendation (Government of Ireland 1999, 22) that parents be involved in curricular planning as evidenced by the fact that 90% of parental involvement was found to be in organizational (as opposed to curricular) planning (Department of Education and Science 2003a, 29).

A study by Mac Giolla Phádraig (2003a, 43), based on two national surveys, one of primary school teachers and one of the parents of primary school children, found that, amongst the teachers surveyed, 'informing parents of the formal curriculum of the school is their preferred level of parental involvement.' The same study found that teachers show little enthusiasm for

involving parents as partners in school policy formation. Teachers were found to be more aware of the benefits of involving parents in school policy or of their official requirement to do so than parents were, leading Mac Giolla Phádraig (2003a, 42) to conclude that this 'could be taken as an indication that parents' primary concern in schools is their child and issues most directly connected to his/her education' and that 'relationships on issues of general school policy may be of secondary concern to them.' The present writer considers that it could also mean that parents have not been made aware by schools of their role in policy formation. The findings of MacGiolla Phádraig's study (2003a) support the Department of Education and Science (2003a) data (presented above, p. 87) with relation to the low involvement of parents in curricular planning.

The evidence presented above suggests that 'much work needs to be done with both parents and teachers if the "spirit of partnership" with parents is to be realised' (MacGiolla Phádraig 2003a, 45). This work includes offering parents encouragement, re-assurance and information.

2.4   <u>Parent-school partnership</u>

In reviewing the literature on parental partnership in schools, the first impression is its sheer vastness, the second, its lack of cohesion. This writer agrees with Dyson and Robson (1999,1) who state that 'the literature is characterized by significant limitations, unevenness in the coverage of different kinds of links, a reliance on local evaluations of small-scale projects and an

absence of wide-ranging programmatic evaluations.' Ryan and Adams (1995, 5) are even more pessimistic when, speaking of research on family-school links, they contend that 'the accumulated evidence resists integration.' For the reader of literature on parental and family involvement in schools, 'drawing conclusions in this area is fraught with difficulties as studies adopt a range of methodologies, concern different types of projects, concentrate on success rather than failure and, to further complicate matters, there is a variation within and between schemes in terms of their effectiveness' (Brain and Reid 2003, 292). Epstein (1992, 5) further highlights the difficulties in interpretation of findings from parental involvement studies, noting that, in some studies, 'the measures of involvement and influence were incomplete' and that 'specific connections between parents and teachers were not measured.' Epstein (1992, 5) further suggests that other studies 'lack the rigor needed to isolate and document specific effects on students of particular practices.' She concludes (Epstein 1992, 6) that there is a pressing need for 'more rigorous, analytic research on the effects on students of specific practices of partnership.'

On reading the literature, a further impression is the wide array of projects which come under the heading of 'partnership' (e.g., Davies 1990, Burch 1993, Lysaght 1993, Houston 1996, Milbourne 2005, Walser 2005). This bears out the point made in Chapter One (p. 9) that the term is interpreted in many different ways. In some of the literature the terms *involvement* and *partnership* are used interchangeably. In reviewing the literature a difficulty presents in that it is not always possible to ascertain that *partnership,* as defined in Chapter

One (pp. 32-34), exists in some projects despite their title. While examining these projects critically, it will be useful to remember that *involvement* is sometimes a path to *partnership* or occasionally becomes *partnership* en route. Partnership 'denotes an end state which may only be achieved through tacit, trial and error, stages of active participation with parents in education' (Lysaght 1993, 196). As Mittler (2000, 158) puts it, 'true partnership is a process rather than a destination.' Mittler echoes Pugh (1989) when he contends that true partnership implies mutual respect based on a willingness to learn from one another, a sense of common purpose, a sharing of information and decision-making and a sharing of feelings. He goes on to state, and this is important in the context of the present review, that the above principles and values are relevant in working with all parents but they represent only *the fundamental building blocks* of a working relationship with families who are all *different* and who have *unique needs* (Mittler 2000, 158). Thus, what constitutes a building block of partnership in one school may be totally inadequate in another.

2.4.1 Conceptual framework for parent-school partnership

Rudestam and Newton (2001, 6) offer the following definition of a conceptual framework:

> A conceptual framework, which is simply a less developed form of a theory, consists of statements that link abstract concepts (e.g., motivation, role) to empirical data. Theories and conceptual frameworks are developed to account for or describe abstract phenomena that occur under similar conditions. A theory is the language that allows us to move from observation to observation and make sense of similarities and differences. Without placing the study within such a context, the proposed study has a "so what?" quality.

Wisker (2006, quoted in Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur 2006, 50) sees a conceptual framework as 'the scaffold, framework of ideas, questions, and theories, methodologies and methods' which help the researcher to develop the ideas underpinning the research. The conceptual framework for the present dissertation will be derived from the literature, presented in this chapter, as well as from a shared understanding, in the context in which the research project is set, i.e., St. Mary's School, of parent-school partnership.

Frameworks and typologies are available in the literature (e.g., Ball 1998, Connors and Epstein 1995, Eccles and Harold 1996) to help us 'to understand the complex web of activities which attempts to bind school, family and community together.' These frameworks look at the web of activities and relationships from different angles (e.g., from an ecological, social or school perspective), all of which give us a deeper understanding of the family/school connection.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 5) remind us of the importance of understanding parental involvement within 'the broader social ecology of parents' lives,' asserting that 'human development cannot be adequately understood without significant reference to the proximal and distal social systems that work to limit or enhance both developmental processes and outcomes.' Bronfenbrenner (1992) suggests that the immediate settings (microsystems) in which adult-child interactions take place and the links between those settings (mesosystems) are embedded in distal environments (macrosystems) and provides us with an ecological framework for

understanding human development. Getzels (1978) presents a framework illustrating the relationship between the institutions and individuals in any given system and other systems and communities. Epstein and her colleagues (Ames, Khoju and Watkins 1993, Becker and Epstein 1982, Connors and Epstein 1995, Dauber and Epstein 1993, Dolan and Haxby 1995) have been involved in on-going large-scale research in the Centre on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, USA, and have developed a typology of family/school partnerships. We will now look at Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979, 1989 and 1992), Getzels's (1978) social system perspective and Epstein's typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991) and at how Keyes (not dated) uses all three to develop a conceptual framework for parent-teacher partnerships. Finally, in this section, Eccles and Harold's (1996) theoretical framework will be presented because this extends the above models and considers parent involvement 'as both an outcome of parent, teacher, and child influences, and as a predictor of child outcomes' (Eccles and Harold 1996, 6).

2.4.1.1 Bronfenbrenner's model

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Keyes, not dated, 6)
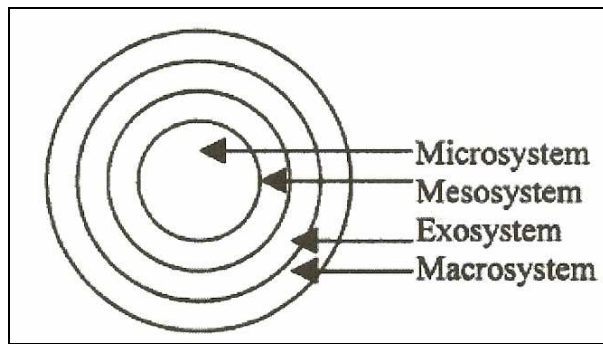
Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989, 1992) provides us with an ecological way (Figure 1) of viewing the home/school relationship. Sumison (1999, 11), quoting Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon (1998), tells us that 'an ecological perspective recognizes that "everything is connected to everything else."' Bronfenbrenner (1992, 226) proposes a taxonomy consisting of 'a hierarchy of systems at four levels moving from the most proximal to the most remote.' Bronfenbrenner (1979, 3) sees the environment as 'a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls.' If we represent this taxonomy pictorially as a series of concentric circles, at the centre is the *microsystem*, a setting where the child or developing person interacts with others in his/her immediate environment. At the next level is the *mesosystem,* which Bronfenbrenner (1992, 227) describes as 'a system of microsystems.' Under this heading we have relations between 'two or more settings containing the developing person' (Bronfenbrenner 1992, 227). Bronfenbrenner (1992, 227) offers the following description of the *exosystem*:

> The *exosystem* encompasses the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does contain that person (e.g., for a child, the relation between the home and the parent's work

place; for a parent, the relation between the school and the neighbourhood group).

In describing the *macrosystem,* Bronfenbrenner (1992, 228) notes that it may be thought of as 'a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context.' The *macrosystem* is the overarching pattern of the culture in which the developing person is situated, 'with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, life styles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in each of these systems' (Bronfenbrenner 1992, 228). Bronfenbrenner (1989) added to his original theory (above) and, in the updated theory, places emphasis on the role of the person in his/her own development and stresses cultural aspects of people's meanings and perceptions.

Bronfenbrenner's model is important for the present study because it shows that parent-school partnership is not a simple two-way relationship between the parent and the school. Parent-school partnership is influenced by both proximal and distal environments as well as the meanings parents and teachers bring to and from those environments.

2.4.1.2 Getzels's social system perspective

Figure 2: Elements of the normative and personal dimension of behaviour in a social system (Getzels 1978, 667)
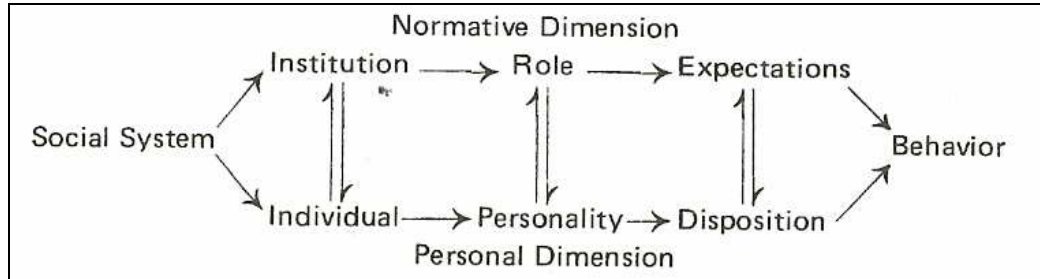
Getzels (1978, 666) tells us that 'one way of attempting to apprehend the interactions among individuals, institutions, and communities and their impact on behaviour is to view the related elements as operating within a *social system* as the general context of behaviour.' This view sees, at one level, the school operating as a particular institution within the social system of a given society, at another level, the classroom operating as an institution within the social system of the school and, at yet another level, the classroom operating as a social system in itself. Two types of phenomena are embodied in the social system. These are the institutions with component roles and expectations (rights and duties) that will fulfil the goals of the system and the individuals with component personalities and dispositions (cognitions and affects) who inhabit the system (Figure 2).

Because institutional roles are complementary, with each role deriving its definition and meaning from the other roles, the role of the teacher and the role of the pupil can only be understood in relation to each other. According to Getzels (1978, 667),

> Behaviour is a function not only of normative expectations but also –
> and perhaps more importantly – of personal dispositions; behaviour in a

social system is always a reflection of some variable proportion of the role and personality dimensions in the complex of the entire structure of roles and interaction of personalities in the system as a whole.

Getzels (1978, 667) states that 'both the institutions and the individuals in any given system … are integrally related to other systems and commodities' and that the expectations and dispositions of individuals in a school have their source in the communities in which the schools are embedded, and cannot be understood apart from them.

Getzels's model is important for the present study as it allows us to view the parent-school relationship through another lens. Parents and teachers will be interacting mostly within Bronfenbrenner's *mesosytem*, and Getzels shows us that there are social systems within that system, i.e., the classroom and the school. The progression of the present project will be influenced both by the dispositions and personalities of the parents and teachers and the role expectations of the school.

2.4.1.3 Epstein's Typology of Family/School Partnerships

Connors and Epstein (1995, 440) note that three broad theoretical perspectives have guided thinking about school and family connections, viz., separate, embedded and overlapping influences of schools and families. The theory of *separate influences* sees the family in charge of the child's social development and the school in charge of the child's education. The theory of *embedded influences* draws on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992) and recognizes

'the more complex and dynamic realities of the effects of multiple contexts on human development' (Connors and Epstein 1995, 441). The theory of *overlapping influences* 'recognizes the interlocking histories of institutions that motivate, socialize, and educate children, and the changing and accumulating skills of individuals in them as the basis for studying connections that benefit children's learning and development' (Connors and Epstein 1995, 442). Connors and Epstein (1995, 446) state that researchers have worked to apply the theory of overlapping spheres of influence in research and practice, leading to the development of a typology of family/school partnership.

In this typology, six types of involvement are identified. Type 1, *basic obligations of families*, includes providing for children's health and development and the creation of a supportive home environment for children's learning. Type 2, *basic obligations of schools,* includes communicating with parents regarding children's progress. Type 3, *involvement at school*, refers to parental participation in classroom activities or attendance at school events. Type 4, *involvement in learning activities at home*, encompasses the area of parental help at home in activities coordinated with children's school work and includes assistance and information from school to parents on how best to provide this help. Type 5, *involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy* sees parents in decision-making roles in, e.g., parents' associations and Boards of Management. Type 6, *collaboration and exchanges with community organizations*, includes connections with agencies, e.g., health and community services, that have responsibility or may contribute to children's education and future successes (Epstein and Dauber 1991, 290-1).

Epstein's Typology is relevant for the present study and will be used when interpreting the findings.

2.4.1.4 Keyes's theoretical framework for parent-teacher partnership

Figure 3: Ecology of the teacher and ecology of the parent (Keyes, not dated, 7)
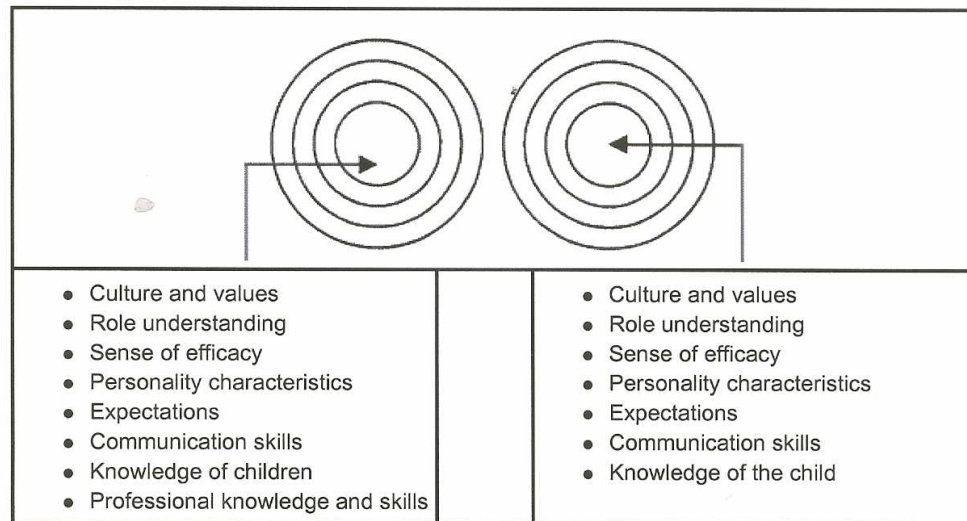
Keyes (not dated) has developed a theoretical framework based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model, Getzel's (1978) social system perspective and Epstein's (1995) typology.

The first part of Keyes's model (Figure 3) integrates research on parent-teacher roles (e.g., Garcia 2000, Greenwood and Hickman 1991, Reed, Jones, Walker and Hoover-Dempsey 2000) into the Bronfenbrenner model (Keyes, not dated, 7). The left-hand box represents all of the teacher's qualities that have developed in the microsystem. The right-hand box represents all of the parent's qualities that have developed in the microsystem. The inner-most circle, the microsystem, represents the teacher-as-person or parent-as-person with the

factors that have developed from their experiences, including challenges to building and bridging partnership. The next circle, the mesosystem, is where adults interact in the school, bringing their experiences with them. The two outer circles, the exosystem and the macrosystem, represent the influence of more distant environments, e.g., laws and customs. Keyes (not dated, 7) holds that this first part of her model 'helps us to see the complexity of the teacher-as-person and the parent-as-person, and the skill that is required to bridge the differences that exist'.

Figure 4: The child in the model (Keyes, not dated, 7)
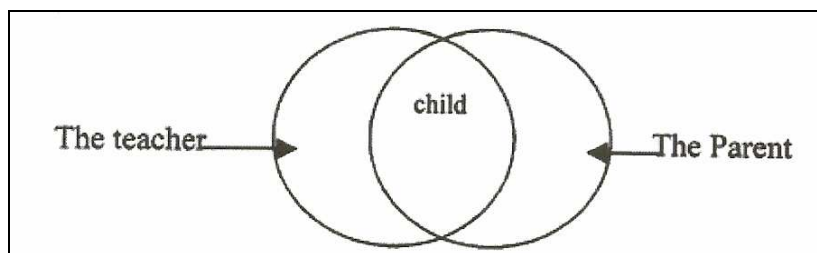
The second part of the model (Figure 4) has the child at the centre, because the child is at the heart of the parent-teacher relationship. Keyes (not dated, 7) states that the way parent and teacher interact is influenced not just by the personal and social factors outlined in Figure 3 but also how each interacts with and feels about the child.

Figure 5: The teacher and the parent in the social system (Keyes, not dated, 8)
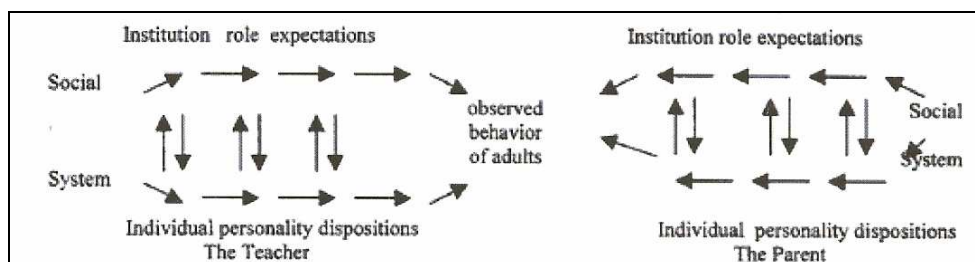
We now move to a social system perspective which 'helps us to understand the dynamic quality of the interaction between the participants and their impact on each other' (Keyes, not dated, 7). The first and second parts of the model were concerned with the teacher-as-person and the parent-as-person as well as their respective feelings for the child, but it is the social system that provides the framework for the interaction between teacher and parent. Keyes provides an interpretation of Getzels's (1978) model (Figure 5). The top row sets out the influences of the institution's role expectations. Keyes (not dated, 8), citing Katz (1984), states that the teacher's role is 'specific, detached, rational, intentional, impartial, and focusing on the whole group' while the parent's role is 'diffuse, attached, irrational, spontaneous, partial, and individual'. The bottom row sets out the influences of the individual personality and dispositions, with 'the teacher's or parent's construction of role, sense of efficacy, expectations, personal attributes, and communication skills' (Keyes, not dated, 8). According to Keyes (not dated, 8), this interpretation of Getzels's model 'highlights the dynamic and complex nature of the parent-teacher partnership and the importance of considering the interplay among all the elements.'

Figure 6: The importance of communication (Keyes, not dated, 9)
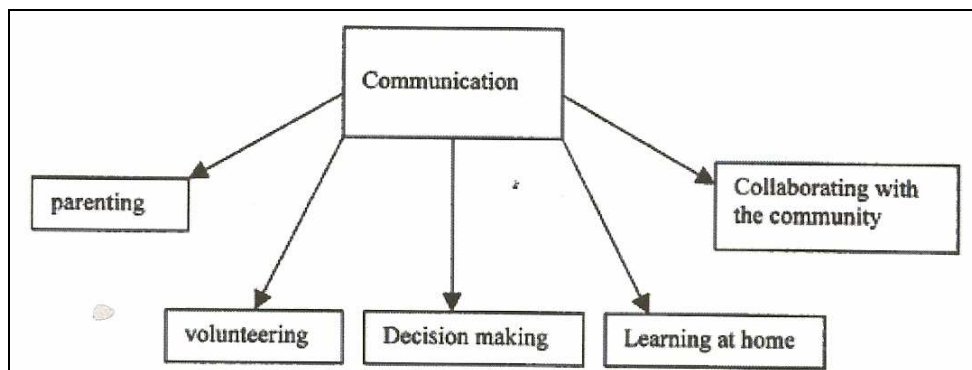
Having considered the parent-as-person and the teacher-as-person, with the child at the centre, and the social system providing a framework for parent/teacher interaction, Keyes now moves to parental involvement in school and Epstein's (1995) typology. It is to communication, and its importance in all aspects of parental involvement, that Keyes turns in creating the fourth part of her model (Figure 6). Keyes tells us that Figure 6 shows the significance of communication in relation to the five other categories. Keyes (not dated, 8) emphasizes 'the importance of communication to bridging, leading to initial effective parent-teacher partnerships as well as promoting more extensive parent involvement as characterized by Epstein's typology.'

(See Figure 7, next page, for Keyes's full model.)

Figure 7: A theoretical framework for parent-teacher partnerships (Keyes, not dated, 9-10)

- Culture and values
- Role understanding
- Sense of efficacy
- Personality characteristics
- Expectations
- Communication skills
- Knowledge of children
- Professional knowledge and skills

- Culture and values
- Role understanding
- Sense of efficacy
- Personality characteristics
- Expectations
- Communication skills
- Knowledge of the child
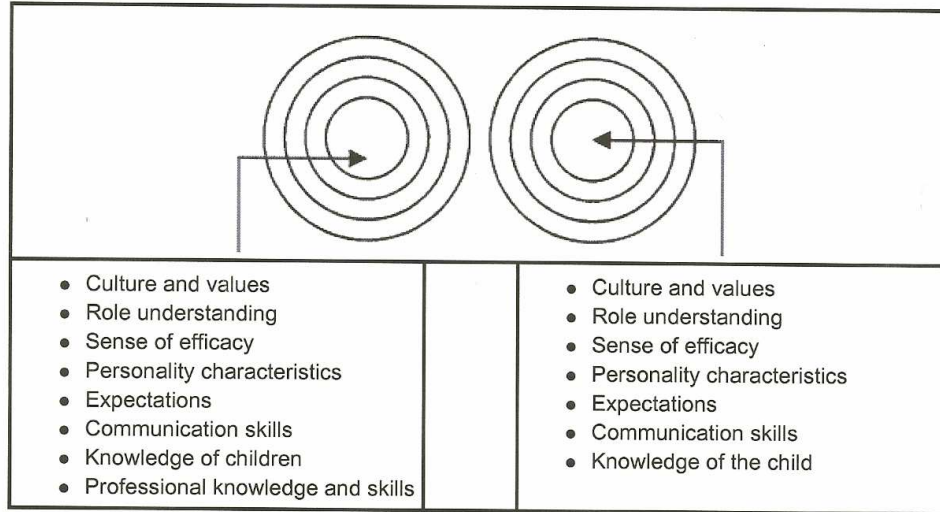
The child in the model

The teacher → child ← The Parent
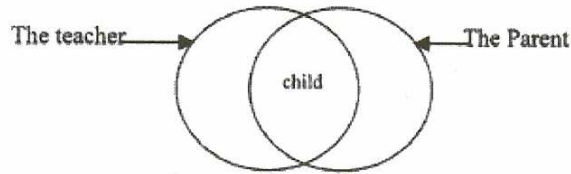
The teacher and parent in the social system

Institution role expectations

Social

observed behavior of adults

System

Individual personality dispositions
The Teacher

Institution role expectations

Social

System

Individual personality dispositions
The Parent

The importance of communication

Communication

parenting

Collaborating with the community

volunteering   Decision making   Learning at home
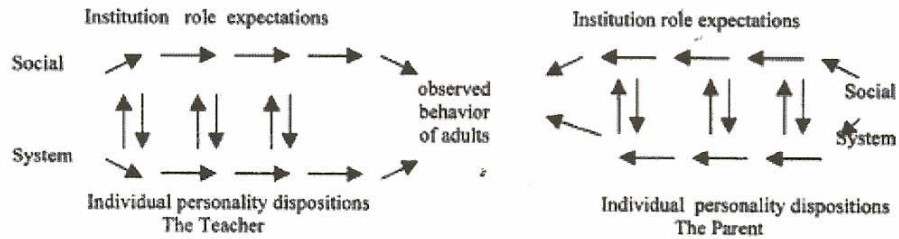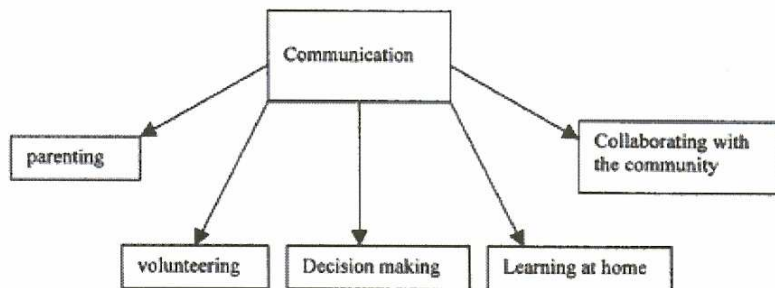
Finally, Keyes presents the full model (Figure 7, above). It is her hope that 'working within the framework may help teachers consider their attitudes about the value of parent-teacher partnership, look at its construct, and monitor their responses to individual situations' (Keyes not dated, 9).

Keyes's model is useful for the present research as it highlights the complexity of the parent-as-person and the teacher-as-person and the importance of communication.

2.4.1.5 <u>Eccles and Harold's model</u>

Eccles and Harold (1996) show us another way of looking at the parent-teacher relationship and of understanding the complexities of this relationship. They say that their model suggests a framework for thinking more generally about the ways schools and parents influence school performance (Eccles and Harold 1996, 6).

(See next page for Eccles and Harold's model.)

Figure 8: A model of the influences on and consequences of parent involvement in schools (Eccles and Harold 1996, 5)

FIG. 1.1. A model of the influences on and consequences of parent involvement in the schools.
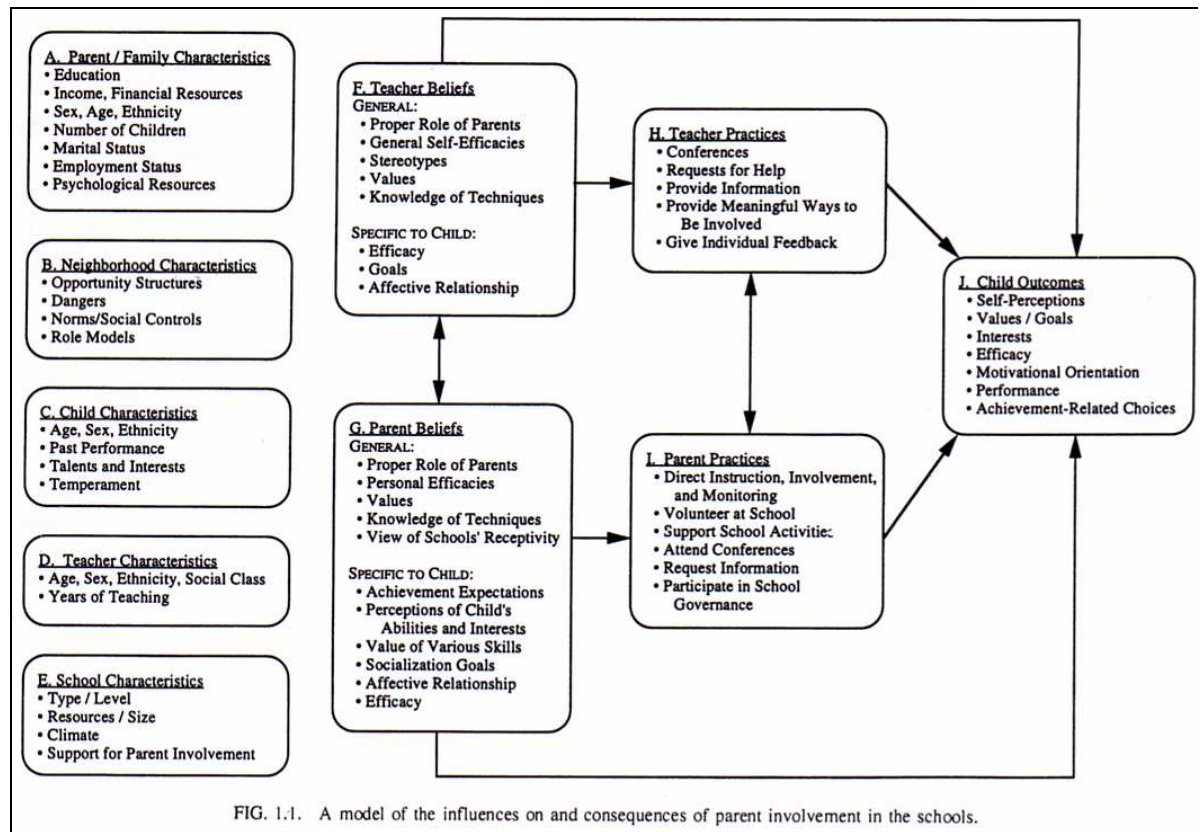
Eccles and Harold's model (Figure 8) details these influences. The first set of influences, which they term *exogenous variables*, 'variables that have indirect or more global and removed effects on parental involvement' (Eccles and Harold 1996, 6), are shown in the left-hand column of Figure 8 (Boxes A-E). These include family and parent characteristics, influences of community/neighbourhood, child and teacher characteristics as well as the structure and climate of the school (Eccles and Harold 1996, 6). Eccles and Harold (1996, 6) state that they have not connected these with arrows to the other boxes because they have both direct and indirect effects on all of the other boxes. The second column (Boxes F and G) includes beliefs and attitudes

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of teachers and parents. Eccles and Harold (1996, 6) hold that these beliefs and attitudes affect each other and directly affect Boxes H and I in the third column, i.e., specific teacher and parent practices. Finally, the variables included in Boxes F, G, H and I 'are assumed to affect directly the child outcomes listed in the last column' (Eccles and Harold 1996, 6). Eccles and Harold (1996) point out that some of the child outcomes in Box J are either identical or very similar to the child characteristics listed in Box C. They state that this is intentional and shows that the model is cyclical in nature and that today's child outcomes become tomorrow's child characteristics and so the cycle continues. The present study focuses on parent outcomes which are also cyclical.

As we undertake the action research, Eccles and Harold's model helps us to understand the cyclical nature of parent-school partnership. The characteristics of the parent, teacher, child, school and neighbourhood will influence parent and teacher beliefs, leading to practice which in turn leads to outcomes. These outcomes will then influence and change the beliefs and so the process begins again.

2.4.2 Studies

This section will consist of three parts:

- Irish studies

- International studies

- Themes on parent-school partnership drawn from the literature

2.4.2.1 <u>Irish Studies</u>

Irish literature on parental involvement/partnership falls mainly into three categories: (1) literature on parental partnership in early years education; (2) literature concerning the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme; and (3) other research projects.

2.4.2.1.1 *Partnership in early years education*

As noted by Walsh and Cassidy (2007), a large number of publications exist relating to the support and promotion of parental partnership and participation in early childhood education settings. It is not proposed to survey these publications in this work as the present project relates to a primary school setting. It is, however, important to note the significance accorded to promoting partnerships with parents at the early childhood education stage. Walsh and Cassidy (2007, 176) tell us that there were 170 Irish publications on the theme of parents and families between 1990 and 2006 and that, through thematic analysis, four sub-themes were identified in the literature. These are: (1) partnership and participation; (2) parental and family supports; (3) parental guidance and training; and (4) work-life balance. A summary of this literature and bibliography may be found in Walsh and Cassidy (2007, 176-187).

2.4.2.1.2 *The Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme and its related research and case studies*

Literature on the HSCL Scheme comprises:

1. Evaluations of the Scheme (Ryan 1995, Ryan 1999, Archer and Shortt 2003)

2. A study of the Scheme (Conaty 1999)

3. *Including All: Home, School and Community United in Education* (Conaty 2002)

4. A publication by the HSCL Coordinators (2005-2006) entitled *The Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme in Ireland: From Vision to Best Practice*

Evaluations of the Scheme by Ryan (1995, 1999) and Archer and Shortt (2003) have been described in the section, above, on educational disadvantage (pp. 65-68). We will now look at Conaty's two works (1999, 2002) and the publication by the HSCL Coordinators (2005-2006).

A doctoral work by Conaty (1999) 'centres on partnership and traces it in attitudes, activities and perceptions of the various key personnel involved in the HSCL scheme' (Conaty 1999, 310). Conaty used two hypotheses, viz., 'that there is no difference in the attitudes of principals, coordinators and teachers, these being three sub-groups of one of the partnership bodies,' the school, and 'that the coordinator is an important link agent in the partnership enterprise of the HSCL scheme' (Conaty 1999, 152). A questionnaire was sent to the principals and coordinators in all of the schools involved in the scheme in 1994, a total number of 182 schools. Following the completion of the questionnaire, a stratified random sample of sixteen schools was chosen for an in-depth study. The sample included schools from different locations, from different types of schools and from different sized communities. The quantitative research consisted of questionnaires for principals and coordinators

in 182 schools and teachers in the sixteen selected schools (Conaty 1999, 156). Chairpersons and parents also got a short questionnaire to complete. Interviews were held with principals, coordinators and a 'core group' of involved parents in the sixteen selected schools. The questionnaire sought information on six themes. These were: (1) valuing people; (2) communication; (3) structures; (4) development; (5) partnership; and (6) outcomes. The interviews focused on the HSCL Scheme, its strengths, weaknesses, challenges and the role of the coordinator. Conaty's research also contained an action research component, where HSCL coordinators involved in ten workshops shared their expertise and experience which led 'to seeking solutions and improvement' (Conaty 1999, 168).

Findings from the study rejected the first hypothesis, i.e., that there is no difference in the attitudes of principals, coordinators and teachers, these being three sub-groups of one of the partnership bodies. Conaty (1999, 470) found 'diverging perceptions among principals, coordinators and teachers and evidence of rather poor consultation.' With respect to the second hypothesis, Conaty (1999, 475) found that coordinators functioned well in the following areas: availability to parents, provision of parents' rooms and crèches, provision of courses, classes and activities for parents, involvement in policy formation and opportunities for parents to act as a resource to the school and school community. Conaty (1999, 477) notes that a particular strength of the coordinator is 'the ability to network with agencies and to direct parents towards existing services either within or outside their local community.'

Weaknesses noted were the low importance accorded to home visitation and an absence of planning, monitoring and evaluating.

It would be impossible to record all of Conaty's findings within the constraints of this dissertation. The findings from the study listed below have particular relevance to the present study.

- While more than three-quarters of coordinators viewed developing relationships and communicating with parents, pupils, teachers and community as a top priority, only 7.5% of principals rated it as a top priority. (While the developing of relationships with parents and community is mandatory under the Education Act, 1998 [Long Title] Conaty's research was conducted before the implementation of the Act.)

- Only a small percentage of principals, coordinators and teachers accorded targeting of the most disadvantaged pupils top priority.

- The top reason for communication with parents was to give negative information, in the view of 43.1% of principals, while only 2.5% of principals considered the top reason for communication to be to listen to, affirm and support parents.

- The valuing of parents and community agencies was not highly esteemed among principals and teachers but was by coordinators.

- While the opinions of parents were sought infrequently, there was evidence that parents were involved in some decision-making.

Conaty then went on to write a further document, *Including All: Home, School and Community United in Education.* Conaty (2002) is in a key situation to produce this material as she has been in the position of National Coordinator of the HSCL Scheme since its inception. Conaty (2002) provides a theoretical and historical backdrop to the scheme. She outlines the philosophy of the scheme, describes how the scheme is run and discusses partnership and the role of the coordinator. She gives examples of home/community work in other areas of the world and states that the work of Pantin (1979, 1984) in Trinidad and Tobago has influenced the HSCL Scheme in Ireland. Pantin was project director of Servol (Service Volunteered for All), a community and education project funded by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation set up in a disadvantaged area in Trinidad in 1970 (Conaty 2002, 57). A description of the Servol Project can be found in Conaty (2002, 57-61) but, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is worth noting Pantin's theories, as outlined by Conaty (2002), because they provide sterling advice for the would-be action researcher or anyone attempting to develop partnership with parents and the community. Among Pantin's theories are 'attentive listening' and 'respectful intervention.' Pantin advises: 'You listen to the people… you never stop listening…you begin to hear the voice of the people as the important element of their own development… you let the thing grow in its own way and its own time' (Conaty 2002, 58). Pantin further advises that 'community workers must take cognizance of the attitudes, values and priorities of the local people' and that 'community workers must present their views for discussion, in the realisation that the local people have the choice of accepting or rejecting

them' (Conaty 2002, 58). Conaty (2002, 58) puts forward Pantin's view that this process 'hurts' the community workers initially but leads to a respectful understanding of the people, enabling the local community to follow a road of their own choosing, not one the workers feel they should travel. The present project stemmed from 'attentive listening' and grew in its own way and its own time.

The publication by the HSCL Coordinators themselves, *The Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme in Ireland: From Vision to Best Practice* (The HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006) occupies an almost unique position in the literature because publications describing the process of actual home/school partnership are rare indeed. Amongst the processes described are the following:

- Courses and classes for parents: Keeping parents close to children's learning
- Literacy initiatives: Home, school and community working together
- *Mathematics for Fun* and *Science for Fun*: Parents as a resource in the classroom
- The Local Committee
- Parents as educational home visitors
- Transfer programmes: Support programmes for parents and children
- International parents

Three further processes outlined in the publication will be described in more detail here because these processes, viz., 'home visitation,' 'the parents' room'

and 'parents, pupils, teachers and community working together on policy formation,' all have a direct bearing on the present action research project.

Home visitation is at the heart of the HSCL Scheme's focus on partnership. During visits, HSCL coordinators listen, not to fix, criticize or analyse, but so as to appreciate the reality of parents' lives. The coordinator is in a position to bring 'good news' and also material items such as information packs for parents of incoming Junior Infants. Coordinators can explain school programmes or initiatives to parents, answer any questions parents may have about the school and offer parents support and encouragement (HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006, 22-25).

The HSCL Coordinators note that *the parents' room* is 'an integral part of the life of the school' (HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006, 28). The coordinators see the parents' room as a welcoming place where parents can relax and find support, encouragement and reassurance from other members of the school community. Parents' rooms also provide a venue for meetings, courses and support programmes and may contain equipment such as a computer, printer, television, children's toys and books/literature of interest to parents.

The HSCL Coordinators state that the purpose of the inclusion of parents, pupils, teachers and community members in *policy formation* is 'to give all parties a voice in what is contained in the policy, to draw on the life experience of the school community, and to give a sense of ownership of the policy' (HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006, 65). Examples of two case studies, illustrating

the parental role in policy making, are provided. In the first case study, a substance misuse policy was developed. Having initially attended sessions where the issues were discussed, parents, staff members, pupils and the coordinator attended a seminar organized by a City Partnership on substance abuse. The information gathered was taken to a Local Committee where there were experts with specific knowledge of substance misuse. Following this, 'a comprehensive policy was developed that reflected the views and needs of all parties' (HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006, 66). The policy was then approved by the Board of Management. In the next school year, staff members, pupils and parents monitored the policy. The school linked with a mental health association and pupils, parents and members of staff attended seminars. The HSCL Coordinators conclude: 'The continuous sharing of information with relevant groups … ensured that the policy was a living document in the school, providing continuing support to all parties' (HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006, 66).

The second case study looks at the development of an attendance policy. An invitation was issued to all parents of children in the school to take part. To ensure the inclusion of the most marginalized parents, the coordinator visited homes to discuss the issue and personally invite parents. Core parents in the school, i.e., parents who were already very involved with the school, asked other parents to attend. The policy was developed over two one-hour sessions at a time that suited parents. The first session dealt with the cause of poor attendance. Parents worked in groups on the issues 'in order to support each other more and to ensure the inclusion of the most marginalized parents'

(p. 67). Parents were impressed during the sessions by the manner in which the teachers listened to them and, when the teachers responded, 'were astounded at how much a child can miss in one day' (p. 67). At the end of the first session, the Education Welfare Officer spoke about the Education Act and its implications for parents and teachers. At the second session, the parents looked at issues relating to home and the teachers considered school issues. Acceptable absences were identified. The policy contained strategies for improving attendance and for highlighting good attendance. A structured system was established for monitoring attendance. As a result, attendance figures improved, especially for those families with serious attendance issues. The coordinators conclude that 'this led to improved performance in the school' (HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006).

2.4.2.1.3   *Other research projects*

Four studies will be presented in this section. The final two will be presented with in-depth analysis and the first two in less detail.

A study by Moroney (1995), *Evaluating a Home/School Partnership in a Deprived Area*, was carried out in a second-level school and is included here because it uses an action research approach, as does the present project. Moroney (1995, 12) contends that 'the desire to achieve equality of educational opportunity calls for partnership in education and the development of structures and strategies to empower parents to become active partners.' Moroney (1995) states that an action research approach was used. This approach involved diagnosing a problem and putting action in place based on this diagnosis. Using

data on attendance, attainment, homework and behaviour from the students in two classes, one class of above average ability and one of slightly below average ability, Moroney (1995, 57) diagnosed the problem, which, she states, was 'that there was a relationship between the academic success, behaviour and the social adjustment of students and the support received from parents.' Moroney (1995) notes that, in the above-average class, parents had 90% records of attending induction and parent-teacher meetings while, in the below-average class, parents had 50% records of attendance. A further analysis of the below-average class showed that the twelve most successful students in the class had parents with good attendance records. The action which was put in place was based on the hypothesis that, if the school could influence parents to give more support to their children, the children would be better adjusted and more successful, that all parents were not aware of the importance of their role in the home/school partnership and that, if parents were to get this information and understand it, 'they would then support their children' (Moroney 1995, 57). The action involved improving induction methods for incoming First-Years and their parents in the new school year and the induction meetings were made a compulsory part of enrolment. A record of the parents who attended the first induction meeting shows that 96% of parents of Band 1 (highest achieving students) attended while only 50% of parents of Band 4 students attended. At the meeting, parents made a number of 'sensible suggestions' (Moroney 1995, 58), e.g., the organization of parent/tutor meetings early in the school year and the introduction of a school track suit. These suggestions 'were quickly taken up by the school in order to emphasize to parents that their views were valued' (Moroney 1995, 58). Moroney (1995, xiii) concludes that the new induction

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programme 'did not effect any measured change in attendance, attainment or behaviour' but that there was an increase in attendance at parent/teacher meetings as a result. She also reports that the new induction programme was well received by parents and found to be helpful by parents and students.

The action undertaken in Moroney's (1995) project was successful in that it increased parent attendance at parent/teacher meetings and was well received by parents and students. The study highlights the difficulty of involving some parents in school and acknowledges the difficulty these parents may have. As Moroney (1995, xiii) notes: 'Some parents revealed that their personal and family difficulties prevented them from giving their children the support expected by the school.'

A study by O'Gara (2005), *Perspectives on Consultation with Parents in the Development of the School Plan*, examined 'current practice regarding consultation in school development planning, in a sample of schools, from the perspective of the principal, members of the Board of Management, teachers and representatives of the Parents' Association or parents who are actively involved in the school' (O'Gara 2005, 21). This study is included because, as part of the present action research, parents participated in policy formation.

Three hypotheses were central to O'Gara's study. The first hypothesis was:

> There is a difference between the aspiration of partnership in the development of school policies as espoused in education legislation and Department of Education and Science circular letters, policy guidelines and publications and the process by which parents are currently consulted in school development planning.
> (O'Gara 2005, 21)

The second hypothesis was:

> Partnership with parents remains a relatively new concept for Boards of Management, principals, teachers and parents themselves.
> (O'Gara 2005, 21)

The third hypothesis was:

> Support is required to encourage school communities to develop from an acceptance of parental representation on The Board of Management and the establishment of a Parents' Association to more accountable, diverse, participatory partnership which should involve parents in a central way in the school development planning process.
> (O'Gara 2005, 21)

The schools chosen for participation in the research were forty-three schools in the district covered by a DES inspector (i.e., the researcher). The research had both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative component comprised a questionnaire which principals of the schools were asked to complete. The qualitative component comprised case studies in which data was elicited from Board of Management members, Parents' Association representatives or parents who were actively involved in the schools and the teachers. The data acquired was analysed under six themes. These were: (1) engagement with school development planning; (2) purpose for involving parents in school development planning; (3) process of involving parents in school development planning; (4) consultation with parents with respect to specific policy areas; (5) structures – Board of Management, Parents' Association; and (6) relationships – facilitating or inhibiting factors in school development planning.

With regard to the first hypothesis (above), O'Gara (2005, 300) states that DES publications and circulars on school development planning are very general and do not provide clear direction on how partnerships are to be managed at local level. The study provides evidence of significant progress being made in the area of schools involving parents, teachers, Boards of Management and Parents' Associations in policy formation. However, 'the education partners do not have a clear picture of what a school plan should encompass and have minimal knowledge of requirements for consultation, review and circulation of the school plan' (O'Gara 2005, 301). O'Gara found that the first hypothesis (above) was substantiated, i.e., that there is a difference between the DES aspiration of partnership in the development of school policies as espoused by legislation and documents and the actual parental consultation processes.

Concerning the second hypothesis (above), O'Gara's study found an increasing awareness of the importance of including the perspective of parents, particularly in organizational policies and policies in the area of social, personal and health education. The study found that school communities are at different stages with regard to parental engagement in school planning. The second hypothesis, that partnership with parents remains a relatively new concept for Boards of Management, principals, teachers and parents themselves, was proved correct by the study.

In relation to the third hypothesis (above), O'Gara's study found that each group of education partners, viz., principals, Board of Management members, parents and teachers, indicated the need for support and training in the area of

education and the law and that they lack knowledge of DES circular letters and documents that provide guidance on the process of school development planning. The third hypothesis, that support is required to encourage school communities to develop from an acceptance of parental representation on the Board of Management and the establishment of a Parents' Association to more accountable, diverse, participatory partnership which should involve parents in a central way in the school development planning process, was also supported by the study findings.

A study by Hanafin and Lynch (2002), *Peripheral Voices: Parental Involvement, Social Class, and Educational Disadvantage,* is the first of two studies presented in this dissertation that had been carried out in the school in which the present project is set. This study was conducted in the late 1990s.

Hanafin and Lynch (2002) do not define educational disadvantage. They do, however, give the reader a sense of the background of the population involved, stating that the school is located in a large urban area in Ireland. This area had, at the time of the study, high unemployment, high levels of early school leaving, dependence on the welfare system and low levels of educational participation (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 38).

The following is a summary of the material presented by Hanafin and Lynch (2002, 35-38) as an introduction to their study, which gives a sense of the theoretical framework for the study.

Though much contemporary literature on parental involvement implies an undifferentiated parental voice, parental involvement in schools has two separate strands with two separate rationales, viz., interventions directed at working-class parents and more general involvement, directed at all parents. With regard to the first type of involvement, government initiatives, e.g., the HSCL Scheme, *Early Start* and the Early School-Leaving Initiative, have been directed at families rather than schools and have been devised and implemented without consultation with working-class parents. The school is not examined as a reason for educational failure. Concerning the second type of involvement, parents are treated as a homogeneous group and the involvement is 'classed' in that it is mainly middle-class parents that are involved and visible (Hanafin and Lynch 2002).

The study population consisted of twenty-one parents of pupils in Senior Infants (i.e., the second year of primary school) and Fifth Class (i.e., the seventh of eight years of primary school). While the title of the article suggests that the parents in the study were 'peripheral,' class teachers of these parents' children suggested that the parents involved were either 'interested' or 'very interested' in their children's schooling. This casts some doubt as to whether the parents were, in reality, 'peripheral.' Hanafin and Lynch (2002, 38) believe that 'at least some of the participating parents represent more peripheral voices in that they saw this research as a rare opportunity to express their feelings about the school.'

The strategies used in the study were as follows: Parents of all children in Senior Infants and Fifth Class were invited to participate in the research via notes sent home with the children. Two hundred and twenty-two invitations were issued; thirty-five parents expressed an interest in attending meetings and twenty-one parents actually attended. Three rounds of meetings were held for three groups of these parents and an informal group interview approach was used. Following a brainstorming session, under the general heading 'education,' at the first meeting, the agenda was created by the parents themselves for the second meeting. The topics on the agenda fell under three headings suggested by the researchers, viz., issues within the classroom, issues within the school and issues regarding home-school links. Parents were also asked to consider two topics before the second meeting: What is education? What is education for? The third round of meetings provided an opportunity for parents to consider the taped transcripts and amend if necessary.

Hanafin and Lynch found that, while all of the parents acknowledged and emphasized the importance of education, 'parents' views centred on the role of the school in the perpetuation of disadvantage within society' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 39) and they questioned the nature and purpose of the knowledge transmitted by schools. The most important issue identified by parents was a general lack of consultation with current consultation practices deemed 'inadequate and unsatisfactory' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 40). In relation to the findings on parental involvement with class teachers, while the parents were sometimes positive about their involvement with the teachers, this involvement was 'much more commonly spoken about as inadequate, difficult,

off-putting, excluding and frightening' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 41), though parents acknowledged that large class sizes adversely affected the parent-teacher relationship.

In relation to formal structures for decision-making, none of the parents interviewed was a member of the school Board of Management but 'their perception was that the board was controlled by the school principal and that membership as a parent did not involve any opportunity to influence school policy' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 42).

Two members of the Parents' Council attended the first of the three meetings. These two parents felt that their role as parent representatives was limited and that fundraising was their chief function on the Parents' Council. One parent expressed the view that Parents' Council meetings were always dominated by the principal with decisions already being made 'no matter what anyone says' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 42). Long-serving parent representatives on committees were viewed as sources of disempowerment. In spite of the reservations expressed, parents felt that having a Parents' Council in the school was worthwhile.

The Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme was viewed as 'limited in its contribution to the parent-teacher relationship, occupied as it is with the provision of courses for parents' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 44).

Hanafin and Lynch (2002, 43) believe that 'parents are willing to participate but are prevented from doing so in a meaningful way.' They conclude that 'parents' involvement in formal school structures is limited to fund-raising and associated activities' and that parents consider this level of involvement unsatisfactory (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 44).

In relation to decision-making at school level more generally, Hanafin and Lynch (2002, 44) tell us that 'parental representation, involvement and power in formal school structures was only one aspect of the parent-school relationship discussed at meetings' and that 'a raft of other decisions taken at school level' left parents feeling 'uninvolved, unrepresented and powerless.' They state that these included decisions about school uniforms, school tours and curricular and extra-curricular provision.

Parents felt that a heavy financial burden was placed on them to purchase school books and that a book rental scheme in the school would be desirable. They did not feel, however, that they could initiate such a scheme themselves or cause such a scheme to be initiated. Hanafin and Lynch (2002, 45) observe that 'parents felt that if they questioned the lack of consultation with regard to these matters, or indeed with regard to any other aspect of school management, they were made to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome.'

In conclusion to the study, Hanafin and Lynch (2002, 38) state that the study does not claim 'to present a homogeneous working-class parental view or to suggest that such a view exists.' This study raises important issues. An

undetermined percentage of parents in the school felt dissatisfied with the nature and purpose of the knowledge transmitted by schools. This, of course, is largely a matter outside of the control of individual schools since the curriculum is mandated by the Irish Government (Government of Ireland 1999). What is more worrying is the fact that an undetermined percentage felt that they were not consulted by the school and felt outside of the decision-making process. This is a very interesting finding in view of the fact that structures were in place for the parents' voices to be heard, viz., the Parents' Council and parental representation on the Board of Management. At least some of the parents in this study were of the opinion that these structures were not operating efficiently in this respect. It is also disconcerting to note that some parents saw communication with class teachers as 'inadequate, difficult, off-putting, excluding, and frightening' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 41). What is not discernible, given the small sample, is whether these parents' experiences are representative of the parent body as a whole at the time of the study. Still, the fact that even a small number of parents would express this view is cause for concern. Finally, the fact that some parents in this study saw the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme as 'limited in its contribution to the parent-teacher relationship' and saw it as occupied with providing courses for parents, may mean that these parents had not had first-hand experience of the scheme. This may mean that they were not amongst the number of disadvantaged and marginalized parents in the school, because it is to these latter parents that the scheme is targeted. The claim that the scheme is 'limited in its contribution' cannot, therefore, be taken as a criticism because the goals

of HSCL (Chapter One, pp. 14-15) focus on supporting marginalized parents (Conaty 2005-2006, 8).

Part of the present action research study's remit is to identify parental meanings of partnership and to discern parental experiences of parent-school partnership. Hanafin and Lynch's (2002) study will provide a useful frame of reference for comparison purposes.

A study by Lannin (2005), *A Reading Intervention Project in a School Designated as Disadvantaged. A Study of the Effects on Parents' Perception of their Role in their Children's Education and on Children's Reading Achievement,* is the second study presented in this dissertation that was undertaken in the school in which the present project is set. This is a very different kind of study from the previous one in that the views of parents were sought following an intervention project. The study focuses on this intervention and its outcomes. It therefore allows us to view parental partnership through another lens and adds to our understanding of parent-school partnership.

The project sought to acknowledge and promote the role of the parent as the primary educator and to engage parents as partners in developing their children's reading skills (Lannin 2005, 3). The study aimed to assess the impact of a reading intervention project in a school designated as disadvantaged on (a) parents' perception of their role in their children's education; (b) the children's reading behaviour; and (c) the children's reading attainment (Lannin 2005, 13). This intervention project constituted the work undertaken in the school as part

of the *Bridging the Gap* Project (described in Chapter One, pp. 18-21) during the 2004/2005 school year, i.e., the fourth year of the *Bridging the Gap* Project.

Lannin (2005, 4) describes the area in which the school is situated as an area in which, traditionally, there is high unemployment, significant socio-economic deprivation and a high rate of early school leaving. She points out (2005, 5) that, while this area had shared in the economic boom of the previous decade, 'it may be argued that for non-skilled manual workers … comparative disadvantage has, in fact, increased.'

In relation to the framework of the study, it has as its bedrock the belief that both competence in literacy and partnership with parents in education are key to children's educational success. The following is a brief summary of Lannin's introduction to her study.

The socio-economic status of families impacts significantly on children's educational participation and outcomes and has been shown to impact on children's reading achievement (e.g., Cosgrove, Kellaghan, Forde and Morgan 2000, Weir 2001, Eivers, Shiel and Shortt 2004). Structures need to be put in place to facilitate parents to become part of the education process. This is particularly true in the case of parents whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage because parents' socio-economic status may affect how parents intervene in school on behalf of their children.

With regard to literacy, while the literature is not in complete agreement regarding positive outcomes resulting from parental involvement (e.g., Hannon and Jackson 1987, Macleod 1996), there is strong evidence that, where parents were involved in literacy teaching, children benefited (Eivers et al. 2004, Potts and Paull 1995, Topping and Whitely 1990, Weinberger 1996).

The project population consisted of sixty-eight children in three First Classes (i.e., the third year of primary school) and their parents. Before each stage of the project, meetings were held with parents, class teachers, the principal and the project coordinator, i.e., the researcher of that study. Parental involvement in the project was invited at these meetings and, subsequently, by letter to each parent.

The reading intervention project consisted of four separate strands, viz., storybook reading, paired reading, teaching literacy through information technology and story-writing. Parental involvement was a key component of the first three strands.

The project began in September 2004 with a six-week parental involvement programme of storybook reading, where parents read to the children. The initial six-week session was followed by a further six-week session of paired reading, with parents and older children reading with the younger children, using structured readers. For the third strand of the project, literacy was taught through information technology. Parents worked with children on computers in the school computer room for thirty minutes a week for a six-week period.

Parents also read books based on the computer programme at home with the children. Celebration was an important part of the project. Families were invited to a graduation ceremony at the conclusion of the project.

Children's language development and reading progress were assessed using pre-tests and post-tests and children's reading scores at post-testing were compared with the scores of children in the same standard in the three years before the intervention began. Parents were surveyed by means of a questionnaire which sought information on the impact of the project on children's interest in books and reading and on whether the project influenced the child's attitude to school. The questionnaire sought also to determine the effects of the project on parents' perceptions of their competence and confidence in helping their child learn to read. It sought to establish the influence of the project on parents' knowledge of suitable books for their child, their knowledge of the school system, their perception of their role in their child's education, their attitude to school and their perception of the school's attitude to parents as partners in the education system. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted. These looked for parents' views on the project and on the benefits accruing to the child as a result, on their own level of enjoyment when participating and on various aspects of parental partnership that may have benefited from the project. The interviewees were also asked for advice when planning future projects.

The project resulted in increases in the children's scores for both language and reading. The children's average standard score on the Drumcondra Primary

Reading Test (Educational Research Centre 1995) was 99.62 at post-testing, compared with an average of 96.99 for children in First Class in the school in the three years prior to the introduction of the reading project (1999 – 2001). Parents who took part in the project indicated that, as a result of participating, they knew more about both how to help their child's reading and what was happening in the school, that they could play a bigger part than previously in their child's education and that they felt they were treated as partners.

Lannin (2005, 113) notes that the parents involved in the project were, for the most part, the less marginalized parents. She states that constant efforts were made to encourage the more marginalized parents to become involved and that they occasionally did, usually in response to pressure from their children.

Lannin's (2005) study provides a very practical model for the present action research. Lessons taken from it for the action research include the importance of the centrality of the child and the fact that parents are motivated to be involved for time-limited practical activities. Lannin's study also serves to remind the researcher of the extra effort required to get marginalized parents involved.

2.4.2.2 <u>International studies</u>

A vast body of international research exists on parent-school partnership but it is difficult to source studies that describe partnership projects/activities. Descriptions of six parent involvement initiatives will now be presented, followed by one in-depth description of a study (Comer 1991). Not every

aspect of the first six initiatives will be of immediate and practical relevance to the present project but they will illustrate for the reader the breadth of initiatives which come under the heading of parent-school partnership and they will provide, together with the Irish initiatives described, the broader picture into which the present project is set. The first two initiatives took place in the UK and are examples of large-scale, long-term initiatives implemented and funded by the government and local authorities. The second two are US based and are part of the League of Schools Reaching Out, 'a national network designed to increase parent and community involvement in public schools' (Davies 1990). The final two initiatives are action research projects implemented in Australian schools. While the first four initiatives all cater for disadvantaged populations, the final two do not and are included because, as action research projects, they have particular relevance to the present project.

2.4.2.2.1   *Two UK initiatives*

Wolfendale (1996) describes the first initiative, i.e., *The Contribution of Parents to Children's Achievement in School: Policy and Practice in the London Borough of Newham.* This was a parent partnership strategy in the Borough of Newham in London's east end, an area with an ethnically diverse population characterized by deprivation, as indicated by low income, unemployment, debt, poor housing, homelessness and poor health. Wolfendale's (1996) description will show how much importance is accorded by policy-makers to parent-school partnership as a strategy to address educational disadvantage. Wolfendale (1996) states that initiatives such as the one she describes are influenced by and, in turn, influence parental involvement

at national level and are also in response to legislation. The Newham Council and the Newham Education Department have made 'strenuous attempts' over the years to combat disadvantageous circumstances on behalf of its children (Wolfendale 1996, 84). Wolfendale notes that various policies were formulated during the 1980s including *Parents as Partners in Education*. The latter policy was ratified in 1993 and was the culmination of a number of key developments during the previous decade. The first of these was the *Going Community* document (Community Education in Newham 1985). The Council's commitment to equal opportunities was crucial to this document, which contained a strategy for community education (Wolfendale 1996, 85). Parental involvement in school was key and activities included the provision of parents' rooms, participation by parents in reading, and fostering home school liaison.

In 1987, Newham Council and the Local Education Authority (hereinafter LEA) commissioned an independent inquiry to identify factors in Newham 'which acted as a barrier to achievement' (Wolfendale 1996, 86). The report which was issued covered twelve areas, one being 'parents and schools.' The report found some excellent practice in the area of home-school links and identified areas where improvement was needed. It recommended that the LEA should foster home-school communication at all levels and that home-school work should be accorded greater importance (Wolfendale 1996, 86).

Running concurrently with the inquiry was the formation of an interest group which was concerned with 'fostering closer and more effective home-school relationships' (Wolfendale 1996, 86). Resulting from the work of this group, a

series of information leaflets for parents on educational matters was produced, a parents' conference was held in a school and a written policy on 'parents in partnership' was formulated.

In 1993, the working group was re-formed and, in 1994, became broader based and more representative of parents and the community. The new strategy group undertook a survey to establish a data-base of parental involvement and produced an action guide for schools.

Financial support was received from various sources and Wolfendale (1996) singles out and describes one funded initiative, the City Challenge Action for Achievement Project which focused on primary/special schools and nurseries in the area. The project had targets designed to improve parent participation and pupil outcomes over a five-year period, 1993-1998. At the end of the first year, a significant number of targets had been reached. The evidence provided by Wolfendale (1996, 90) centres on parental outcomes, e.g., parental take-up of activities, increased knowledge by parents of school routines and greater parental understanding of the parent-teacher and parent-child relationship.

Wolfendale (1996, 91) contends that 'educational under-achievement by Newham's pupils has been persistent and a model of affirmative intervention involving parents has been needed to offset this.' However, it is disappointing to learn that, in spite of evidence of sustained efforts and parental outcomes in the area of home/school partnership during the 1985-1993 period, there does not seem to be concomitant evidence regarding an improvement in student

outcomes. Wolfendale does not provide figures specific to Newham but, citing authors, e.g., Smith and Noble (1995), tells us that the inequalities in educational performance were as marked in the mid 1990s as they were in the 1960s. Wolfendale (1996, 92) is not, in spite of this, pessimistic and states that the Borough of Newham's range of policies denote a culture in which there have been genuine attempts to power-share by, for example, encouraging people to stand as parent governors, by having strong parental representation on Key Council Committees and by working with the Newham Parents' Centre on many educational and community initiatives. Maybe student outcomes from such an initiative take a long time, even a generation, to manifest. We can take comfort from Wolfendale's (1996, 93) words: 'The Newham schools' questionnaire returns and the case studies in the Action Guide for Schools (1995) provide eloquent testimony that, within Newham, there are many forms of empowerment, and the parental contribution is as educator, consultant, consumer, learner.'

This study shows that the variety of roles parents were allowed to play led to different forms of empowerment. This is an important lesson for the present project.

The second UK initiative presented in this dissertation is described by Houston and entitled *Home-school projects: influencing long-term change.* Houston (1996) describes the Home School Employment Partnership (hereinafter HSEP), set up in 1991, following consultation with schools and community representatives, in Ferguslea Park, Paisley, Scotland, an area of severe urban

deprivation. A multidisciplinary team, including teachers and social workers, began working on the project, the aim of which was 'to improve the educational attainment of young people from the area by improving relationships between home and school and to support young people entering further education, employment or training' (Houston 1996, 97). The HSEP team worked with three secondary schools, seven primary schools and four pre-five educational establishments, as well as linking with four schools for children with special educational needs. A key issue of the partnership was to influence long-term and lasting change and, in this regard, a number of operating principles were developed. Amongst these principles were discouragement of dependency of parents and schools on the projects, collaboration on group work and pilot projects to enable the sharing of knowledge, skills and expertise and continuous evaluation. The Partnership received seven years of funding by the British Government's Urban Programme. This facilitated a continuity of staff and the opportunity to develop a long-term strategy allowing for the gradual transferring of skills and responsibilities between project, schools and parents (Houston 1996, 100).

Houston (1996, 100) outlines the activities planned by the Partnership for each of the seven years, starting with the building of relationships and networks and working through the identification of common issues and strategies, the formulation of joint policy documents, home visiting and staff development to the point where withdrawal could begin from direct provision and evaluation could take place. Houston (1996, 102) expresses difficulty with the practicalities of evaluating 'collaboration and partnership.' She states that

continuous evaluation took place. At the early stages of the project, statistics were gathered on the numbers, purpose and outcome of home visits, on the number of pupil interviews and the destinations of school leavers. Quarterly and annual reports were produced and data was collected using interviews, evaluation workshops and questionnaires. Houston (1996, 104) states: 'HSEP are always careful about making grand claims about improvement in any particular area of home-school work because to do that would be to deny the valuable contribution of other partners.' Unfortunately, Houston (1996) makes no claims, grand or otherwise, and does not provide any information on the outcomes of the evaluation. Still, the project is interesting in terms of its philosophy and good practice. From a philosophical viewpoint, effecting change, discouraging dependency and encouraging collaboration are all worthy concepts. From the point of view of good practice, any aspiring project would do well to emulate the HSEP by building relationships, sharing knowledge and skills, identifying common issues and strategies and formulating policies.

2.4.2.2.2   *Two US initiatives*

The first US initiative, *Building New Parent-Teacher Partnerships: Teacher Researcher Teams Stimulate Reflection,* is described by Krasnow (1990). Davies (1990), Krasnow (1990) and Burch (1993) all write of the *Schools Reaching Out* Project in the US. Davies (1990, 72) describes the Project as 'a national network designed to increase parent and community involvement in public schools.' Davies (1990) sees such involvement resulting in a break in the link between poverty and school failure. Thirty-seven schools serving nineteen urban school districts across the United States were selected by the

Institute for Responsive Education, based at Boston University, to participate in the Project.

Krasnow (1990) describes one element of the Project, viz., the work of two teacher researcher teams. Four volunteer teachers in each of two schools served on each team and helped research staff attitudes to parental involvement. The two schools were located in urban areas serving low-income families and low-achieving students. Neither school had a 'close family-school relationship' (Krasnow 1990, 26) prior to the project. According to Krasnow (1990), staff interviews in both schools reflected the ambiguity teachers feel towards parental involvement. While teachers have high hopes about the possible benefits accruing for children from parental involvement, they also have concerns about parents being in the school and classrooms. Almost all of the teachers expressed a wish that the parents would read more with their children and, as a result, the researchers in one school designed a reading involvement programme for parents. Krasnow (1990) provides qualitative evidence that parents engaged with the programme but we are not told if the programme resulted in increased reading scores. There is no evidence provided that parents had any part in devising the programme or that they were consulted in any way as to its implementation. This is not to detract from the integrity of the project which, after all, had 'schools reaching out' as its philosophy and did not have partnership development as an explicit stated aim.

Circles of Change: Action Research on Family-School-Community Partnerships, the second US initiative, is described by Burch (1993). This was

a parent-teacher action research project, also part of the *Schools Reaching Out* Project, that set out to improve family/school/community partnership. This was a multi-site collaborative action research project involving eight schools. Teams in each school, including parents, teachers and sometimes the principal and students, collaborated to design, implement and improve partnership. The teams documented the progress of the action and, based on this information, made programmatic changes. It seems clear from Burch's description that parents played an important role on the team. She describes the work of one of the teams, in the Atenville Elementary School, situated in a rural area. Members of the school community were displeased by a district decision to change the status of the school from an elementary to a middle school, due to declining enrolment and felt that the decision had been taken without considering the needs of the children and parents. Burch (1993, 15) describes how the team in that school designed a parent involvement programme which included a parents' centre and after-school programme as well as activities that extended into 'the geographically dispersed community' and home visitation by parents. Having overcome initial difficulties, e.g., parents 'storming out of action research team meetings protesting that teachers were using terms they could not understand' (Burch 1993, 15), the team members succeeded in collaborating to administer and analyse questionnaires and compile portfolios on families' needs. Using this data, parents and teachers successfully lobbied the school board and persuaded it to reverse its decision to change the status of the school.

Burch (1993, 12) holds that such internal action is more effective than 'top-down reforms' where the agenda is externally set and which result in minimal change.

2.4.2.2.3 *Two Australian action research projects*

In this section, two Australian action research projects will be presented. What we need to note in looking at these projects is not so much what action took place as the process involved in the projects.

The first Australian action research project, *Parents as Partners for Educational Change: The Ashgrove Healthy School Environment Project*, is described by Davis and Cooke (1998). This project took place in an inner-Brisbane primary school which bears a striking resemblance to the school in which the present project takes place. Both are inner city schools with approximately the same number of pupils and teachers, and both have a tradition of excellence in music. Even the school buildings sound similar. It is not apparent, however, from the description whether the Brisbane school has a disadvantaged population. The project was initiated by two mothers, one with an interest in environmental education, the other with an interest in health education, who viewed participatory action research not just as a means to an end but as a way of empowering adults and children. The project used a five-step process, described by the authors as 'inclusive and actively democratic' (Davis and Cooke 1998, 64) , which involved (1) the creation of a healthy vision for the school; (2) the selection of priority issues; (3) the development of an action plan; (4) putting the plan into action; and (5) evaluation and future

planning. At the end of the phase of the project described by Davis and Cooke (1998), the action put in place included the development of a sun safety policy and the development of a new playground, both areas which had been identified as priority issues.

A salient feature of this project was how the researchers sought to involve as many members of the school community as possible at every stage of the project. At the initial information-gathering stage, they informally consulted with teachers, parents, children and other relevant people in the school community and communicated key points through the school newsletter. 'Visioning' workshops were held to elicit a shared vision and families and teachers were surveyed using questionnaires. Davis and Cooke (1998, 68) contend that having a shared vision 'meant that individual differences in viewpoints were able to be transcended and a sense of community, of working together for common goals, became apparent.' Collaboration and good communication are apparent at every stage of the project and, when it came to putting the plans into action, the 'dynamic partnerships' created 'enabled an impressive range of results to be achieved by the school' (Davis and Cooke 1998, 69).

The project was not all plain sailing. When the two parents first approached the school principal with the idea, he referred them on to the Parents' and Citizens' Association. It is interesting to note that a letter to this association describing the potential benefits of working towards a healthy school elicited no response until a connection was made between the healthy school process and the need

to develop a playground. The authors (Davis and Cooke 1998, 69) also refer to the stress involved in moving the project forward and of the negativity experienced when things did not seem to be moving fast enough. They also express disappointment in the amount of child participation in the project as an active goal was to include the participation of children in creating positive change. While some progress was made in this area, the researchers would have wished for more and planned to focus on working with teachers in the future to enable greater participation by children.

Davis and Cooke (1998) share a number of reflections on the project with us. They consider that the 'inclusive, holistic approach' of the project resulted, not just in change, but in the way the school community carries out change (Davis and Cooke 1998, 72). The development of a sense of co-operative community resulted in open trust where 'people see each other as allies rather than as competitors' (Davis and Cooke 1998, 73). As a result of the project, 'a paradigm shift in thinking' occurred and relationships, following the project, were 'non-hierarchical, participatory and inclusive' (Davis and Cooke 1998, 79).

Davis and Cooke (1998, 80-81) have advice for those implementing participatory action research projects. In their words:

Effective communication is fundamental.
Creating a shared vision is an essential component.
Change can come from any part of an organization.
Adults need 'empowering' so that they can become models for their children.
Criticism and conflict are to be expected and can be seen as an indicator that paradigm shift is under way.
Changes do not come quickly.

Community development aspects are likely to be stronger where parents are driving the process.
The project doesn't happen by itself.

The second Australian project, *Bridges and broken fingernails*, is described by

McKibbin, Cooper, Blanche, Dougall, Granzien and Greer-Richardson (1998).

This project took place in an Australian high school of approximately 1,100

students and 800 parent sets. Though the present project is set in a primary

school, it is interesting to look at the Australian project as it illustrates many of

the difficulties inherent in the parental involvement process.

The project is set against a background of the Queensland Department of

Education policy to increase parent and wider community participation in

education. In 1992, having decided to develop a senior school curriculum

framework to review and renew its teaching, the school approached a Brisbane-

based university for support. As a result, a collaborative programme developed,

including several projects, one of which centred on parents and the school

community (McKibbin et al. 1998, 90). At this stage, the school had not

developed structures to meet the Department of Education guidelines

concerning parent participation in decision-making. In working with the school

and the parents, the university adopted a participatory action research approach.

A project coordinator, a parent in the school, planned and organized events.

Parental involvement began with an initial parents' survey to elicit parents'

perceptions of the school and their participatory role in the school. The survey,

which had a 50% return rate, showed the areas in which the majority of parents

wished to be involved, showed that 93% agreed that a good home-school

partnership was essential and that, while 62% wanted more involvement, 79% had had no involvement.

The project proceeded through a series of meetings between parents, school staff and university researchers, at which key issues were raised and prioritized and action plans were decided upon. Some meetings were attended by officials from the Queensland Department of Education and the Queensland Council of Parents' and Citizens' Association. Improving communication and the establishment of a parent meeting place were two important areas identified for action. Issues, described below, emerged as the project progressed. The involved parents finally decided that the most acceptable way to be involved was through formal structures and, since many of them felt unable to deal with these structures, they decided to organize and attend parent workshops aimed at informing and upskilling parents in decision-making processes. This strategy proved successful and parents on the executive of the Parents' and Citizens' Committee (P&C) were appointed to various management committees within the school. Parents also began to participate in other aspects of school life, e.g., attending and representing their views at conferences. The authors (McKibbin et al. 1998, 105) note that the parents had progressed, during the life of the project, from Epstein's Levels 2 and 3 involvement to part of the way to Level 5. (See pp. 96-98, present dissertation, for description of Epstein's Typology). They also note five issues that they felt needed to be elaborated upon in relation to parent-school relationships (McKibbin et al. 1998, 105-110). These are: (1) the issue of the involvement of the uninvolved; (2) the fact that the P&C was the only arena in which parents could formally participate; (3) the apparent

inconsistency between the type of parental involvement advocated by the Education Department and wished for by parents and the school's readiness to accommodate this type of involvement; (4) the fact that parents were perceived to have no status unless they fitted into 'appropriate' roles; and (5) the issue of parents' personal growth. The authors contend that the latter occurred when the parents decided to change in order to take part in the formal school structures.

A number of themes emerged as the project developed.

Poor parental attendance was an issue. From an original cohort of forty parents who indicated an interest in further discussing the issues emerging from the parent survey, only five became involved consistently. We note the poor attendance at meetings, e.g., at one meeting, just two parents and no school staff member attended.

Some of the parents felt alienated from the school. One mother stated that 'the school felt closed' (McKibbin et al. 1998, 92). Another described the school as follows: 'It was that foreign country with the culture I didn't understand' (McKibbin et al. 1998, 94).

During the course of the project, parents experienced negativity from some staff members when they were attempting to set up a parents' resource area, to organize a social event and to set up sub-committees of the P&C. One parent spoke of negative body language being more powerful than words, another at being 'blocked at every turn' (McKibbin et al. 1998, 102).

Parents had difficulty in engaging in formal school decision-making structures. By contrast, when a meeting was held in the home of a parent, 'everyone felt comfortable in talking freely about the issues concerning them in a lively, relaxed way' (McKibbin et al. 1998, 97). The parent who spoke these words later referred to the difficulty of imparting the same issues at formal settings such as P&C meetings and school forums.

2.4.2.2.4 *The Yale Child Study Centre School Intervention*

The Yale Child Study Centre School Intervention (Comer 1991) was conducted over three decades, starting in the 1960s. This is a key study, chosen because of its innovative development of a theoretical framework, in partnership with parents.

Comer (1991) does not define disadvantage. He describes the parents who took part in the intervention as intelligent but marginalized, living outside the mainstream of society. Some of them had negative experience of school, had been poorly educated and as a result could not get high-paying, prestigious employment. In Comer's view, these conditions had contributed to family stress and hopelessness, as well as ambivalence about school. While the parents had hope for their children, they sensed that the school system would fail them. These people also experienced racism, which, in Comer's view, prevented them from getting well-paid employment. Comer states that many also felt that society blamed them for their under-education and that of their children. He further contends that, in 1968, when the project began, distrust, anger and

alienation prevented the school and parents from working together to help children succeed.

Comer points out that many of the parents and grandparents had attended school in one of eight states in which four to eight times as much money was spent on the education of a white child as on that of an African-American child, and that the disparity was up to twenty-five times greater in predominantly African-American areas.

The project was 'designed to develop a research-based theoretical framework for understanding poorly functioning schools and then to work with parents and school people to improve school functioning and outcomes' (Comer 1991, 183). During the first part of the project, the theoretical framework was developed. The following is a summary of the framework (Comer 1991):

Children are born into a social network, with parents transmitting the values of the community to their families. As parents care for their children, an emotional bond develops. Parents help their children grow along the developmental pathways critical for academic achievement. This in turn enables children to participate in the life of the school. School staff can then support the children, and a further bond develops. Children of parents living outside the mainstream are developed along different critical pathways. The skills needed for survival in their own communities often get them into trouble in school. The attempts of school staff to control behaviour leads to a struggle. This ultimately leads to school failure for the children, and feelings of anger and alienation for the parents. The crucial aspect of this framework is the

assertion that 'self-affirmation of the child comes more from home than from school' (Comer 1991, 186). Peer and community pressure in areas of economic and social stress often support problem behaviour, so parents must join school staff in visibly promoting good behaviour.

The project started work with two New Haven schools. The school population was 99% African-American, with a high degree of poverty. The two schools in which the work began were ranked the lowest academically in the city with the worst attendance and behaviour problems. One school was dropped by the project after five years because of policy disagreements. It was replaced by another school with a similar profile.

Comer (1991) states that many parents were from the rural south, that many of the staff were from small towns and that both parents and staff remembered a time when school was a natural part of the community, when the authority of parents was transferred directly to the school through the interaction of parents and staff in the community. There was a sense that this kind of authority had something to do with the ability of children to do well in school.

Teamwork was at the core of the Yale School Intervention Project. The project was initiated by a psychologist, social worker, special education teacher and Comer himself, who is a psychiatrist. By degrees they build up a team which embraced all the key stakeholders in the school, and devised a framework (described above) on which to build action. They proceeded to devise strategies based on the framework, and put these into practice in the two schools. All of

the action centred around mutual understanding and participation in decision-making.

The project began in the two schools in 1968. Comer sets it in the context of the time, directly after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. The initial strategy used was *listening to parents*. The first angry encounter with parents led to the setting-up of a school-based Governance Team, consisting of parents, teachers, administrators and professional support staff. Eventually non-professional support staff as well as middle and high school students were added to the team.

The building of trust and collaboration is a recurring theme throughout the description of this project. The initiating team (psychologist, social worker, special education teacher and psychiatrist) shared their ideas of child development with school staff. All of these professionals formed a Mental Health Team, rather than working individually. A Parent Programme was established to support the social programme of the school. As a result of the work of the Mental Health Team and the Parent Programme, behaviour problems began to decline and parents' feelings of anger and alienation began to subside. Very crucially, parents began to share experiences that enabled school people to understand the racial struggle which formed the basis of these feelings. As the Governance Team, the Mental Health Team and the Parent Programme worked together to reduce behaviour problems, a community spirit began to develop and a theoretical basis for understanding schooling began to emerge.

A nine-component programme was designed, based on the theoretical framework. This programme had three stated aims:

1) To bring parents and school staff together and create a community within the school

2) To provide the staff with the knowledge, skills and sensitivity to apply child development and relationship principles in their work with children and parents

3) To create the organization and management structures that would allow parents, staff and students to interact in a co-operative, collaborative way

The nine programme components consisted of three mechanisms, three operations and three guidelines. The three mechanisms were the Governance and Management Team, the Mental Health or Social Support Team, and a Parent Programme. The three operations were a comprehensive school plan with social and academic goals, a staff development programme related to these goals, and goal assessment and programme adjustment. The three guidelines were a 'no fault' policy, decision-making by consensus, and 'no paralysis' of the team leader or principal when action needed to be taken. Comer claims that these mechanisms, operations and guidelines changed the organization and management of a school 'from an authoritarian, hierarchical approach to a participatory, collaborative one' (Comer 1991, 186).

Comer does not describe the methods used to evaluate the project. One gets the impression that great use was made of 'trial and error' (Comer 1991, 186). In

fact, this is the way the project worked, and though not explicitly stated, it falls into the category of action research (Chapter Three, pp. 171-183), which is evaluated on an ongoing basis, with the findings used to create the next step of the plan. To help the team do this, use was made of an operation entitled 'Goal Assessment and Programme Adjustment' (Comer 1991, 186). This is not described, but the meaning conveyed by its title ties in with the concept of action research. This project reads like a description of a building process, with one block, having been evaluated (with no clear description of the evaluation) leading to the creation of the next block.

There are some hard facts presented to illustrate the success of the project. These take the form of school achievements, examination rates and attendance records. These will be discussed below.

Sixteen years after the project began, the two project schools tied in third and fourth places for achievement in the city. The rate of attendance also improved, with both schools being among the top five for five of the previous six years, and there were no serious behaviour problems.

Leading to these increased outcomes for the children were fundamental changes within the schools. As parents and staff collaborated, a sense of community and a good school climate were developed. Parents began to experience ownership of the programme. They started to feel useful, and to experience 'social comfort' in the school. As a result, large numbers of parents began to attend school programmes. The change in structure in the school made

it possible for parents to engage with staff. As a result of this, children were able to form an emotional bond with school people and the school programme. The collaboration of parents and staff led to children's overall development.

A problem encountered in the project was that of parents who wanted to serve on teams every year, in some cases after their children graduated. Comer views this as a limiting factor on their own development as well as that of others. Many of Comer's parents whose skills and confidence improved went on to complete their own education.

A second problem emerged early in the project through a lack of understanding that parents need help in coping with the culture of the school. An important issue emerging was that both staff and parents need training to collaborate and to work co-operatively. This training also needs to be put in place in pre-service teacher education.

As an overall conclusion, highly positive outcomes are claimed for this major, long-term project. Its aims were to develop a research-based theoretical framework for understanding poorly functioning schools, and, following this, to work with parents and school people to improve school functioning and outcomes. The framework was developed and statistics are provided claiming to prove that school functioning did in fact improve. Much qualitative evidence is furnished to this end, which makes impressive and uplifting reading for the educator interested in parental partnership and for this researcher, whose aim is to develop a participatory, collaborative partnership with parents.

2.4.3   Themes on parent-school partnership

Themes, arising from the literature, are now presented because they all impact on the action research project. We will first consider the question of the lack of a common understanding of partnership. Next, we will ask the question, 'Who is "the parent"? The answer to this may seem obvious but, from the point of view of parent-school partnership, the answer is not straightforward. This brings us to the questions of which parents tend to be involved in partnership and where, in the child's school career, this partnership is most likely to occur. The literature provides useful hints on how to implement involvement/partnership and reminds us of the importance of planning for partnership. We examine some barriers to partnership, including power issues. Teacher expertise and time are essential commodities when implementing partnership but are not always available, as we will see. Finally, we will look at role construction and the part it plays in parent-school partnership.

2.4.3.1 <u>Absence of common understanding of partnership</u>

Vincent (1997, 272) holds that 'home-school relations are often discussed in narrow terms focusing on individual parent-teacher interactions.' Indeed, there is a marked absence in the literature of a common understanding of partnership in schools (Brain and Reed 2003). Vincent (1996, 466) casts a jaundiced eye on the use of such words as 'empowerment,' 'participation' and 'partnership,' words with 'positive, but nebulous, connotations.' It is Vincent's (1996, 466) view that, over time, 'such words gain assumed meanings, which may alter and shift in emphasis … but which are rarely critically scrutinized.' MacGiolla

Phádraig (2005, 94) makes the point that 'partnership is promoted both as a means to an end and as a value in itself.' This is a really important point because, as we have noted, the idea of partnership is a stated aspiration and aim of educational policy and legislation in recent years (e.g., Government of Ireland 1992, 1995, 1998, Department of Education and Science 1999, 2005). Partnership as a value is therefore promoted but, as a means to an end, may be difficult to achieve (e.g., McKibbin et al. 1998, Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2002, Department of Education and Science 2003). MacGiolla Phádraig (2005, 94) writes, 'Although the term partnership is universally used within education, its exact meaning is rarely, if ever, clearly defined.' MacGiolla Phádraig (2005, 94) warns that 'the absence of a clear definition of partnership can often facilitate maximum support for the concept in that each constituency can assume their own interpretation of partnership and its implication for them,' adding that 'this absence of clarity can be problematic in that it can lead to misunderstandings and confusion between interested partners.'

2.4.3.2 Who is "the parent"?

In terms of involvement with school, the answer that springs readily to mind is that the parent usually is the mother (Vincent and Warren 1998, West, Noden and Edge 1998).

Partnership with parents is, as noted already, not just a worthy aspiration but is legally binding under the Education Act, 1998. But who is the parent? Having read the Education Act, 1998 definition of *parent* (provided in Chapter One,

(p. 31), we know what a parent is but, in terms of establishing partnership, we must ask, with whom exactly are we attempting to establish partnership? Is it with the mother who brings her child to school every morning and is readily accessible to the teacher? Is it with the father who puts himself forward for membership of the Board of Management? Is it with 'one of the old reliables' who are selflessly available for fund-raising and other school endeavours? Is it with the teenaged mother who is still herself at school? Is it with the parent who cannot speak English? Is with it the parent whom teachers never seen? Could it be with to the guardian of a child who has no parents? Of course, we are ideally attempting to establish partnership with *all* parents but, in the process, we must give due consideration to the diversity of parents connected to any one school. As Gale (1996, 136) cautions, 'it is important to recognize that parents are not a homogeneous mass with a clearly defined set of common interests.' Otherwise, there is a danger that we will treat *the parent* 'as a single, undifferentiated category' (Vincent and Tomlinson 1997, 368). Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) remind us that such an approach is common in the literature on parental partnership. Citing Bastiani (1993), they contend that development is then presented as 'simple, linear and located within the confines of partnership rhetoric, overlooking the need for a careful consideration of the different ways in which both teachers and parents in particular contexts construct and experience their relationships with each other' (Vincent and Tomlinson 1997, 368). When such an approach is accepted, 'teachers tend to adopt the same strategies for promoting parental involvement irrespective of class, parental needs, individual circumstances and so on' (Crozier 1999, 315).

2.4.3.3 <u>Involved parents</u>

The present project specifically sought to discover how parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage can be involved in parent-school partnership. This section will show that there is a variation in the way parents are involved with their children's schools.

In attempting to answer the above question, it is necessary to be aware of the dangers of stereotyping. That said, the literature helps us to come to some conclusions regarding the categories of parents most likely/unlikely to become involved in partnership. Single mothers and mothers who work outside of the home are less likely than other parents to come to the school for workshops or meetings but are as or more likely to spend time helping their children on homework (Epstein 1992). Dolan and Haxby (1995) found that parent attendance at workshops in four Baltimore elementary schools serving disadvantaged populations was highest in schools where the majority of parents were within walking distance and where there were options for childcare. Dauber and Epstein (1993) found that parents who are better educated are more involved at school and at home than less educated parents. They also found that parents with fewer children are more involved with their children at home and that parents who work are significantly less likely to participate in the school building but that working outside of the home is not a significant predictor of involvement at home.

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994, 249) refer to 'circular pathways in which motivation fuels parent involvement, and involvement fuels motivation, which fuels performance.' A study examining parent factors and teacher strategies to foster parent involvement and efficacy in a Canadian pre-school found that parents who perceive themselves as more effective are more involved in their children's education at pre-school level (Pelletier and Brent 2002). Ames et al. (1993) found a positive relationship between parents' perceptions of their child and their involvement, that when parents believe that their child is interested and that their own involvement is likely to make a difference, they may become more involved. A study by Dauber and Epstein (1993) found that parents were more involved in their children's education if the children were better students. Ames et al. (1993, 15) conclude that 'parents may be more willing to become participants when they have a sense of hopefulness.'

With regard to parents who are involved in parents' councils or associations, the OECD (1997, 16) holds that 'the active, committed parents who join and run these organizations are unlikely to be typical of the parents as a whole – or to represent their views.' These parents would arguably fall into Toomey's (1990) 'enthusiasts' category. Toomey identified five groups of parents of pre-school children in an Australian sample, viz., enthusiasts, silent majority, stressed, independents and non-coping parents. Thinking about these different groupings brings us to the question of social class, which has been found to have a powerful impact on whether and how parents become involved (Crozier 1997). A study by Crozier (1997) found that, while most parents saw their role in similar ways, the ways in which they supported their children differed along

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class lines. Findings from the study indicated that middle-class parents had high expectations for their children, leading them to intervene and contact the school frequently. Working-class parents in the study rarely intervened and tended to be reactive rather than proactive (Crozier 1997). Crozier (1997, 198) concludes that parental involvement needs to be carefully considered and managed and that 'some parents' involvement needs more nurturing and support than others.'

2.4.3.4 <u>School levels and involvement</u>

Epstein and Dauber (1991) found that programmes of parental involvement were stronger in elementary schools, in self-contained classrooms and in some subjects, e.g., reading and English. Parental partnership practices decline as children get older (Connors and Epstein 1995, Epstein and Lee 1995). This raises important questions, identified by Ryan and Adams (1995, 22). They wonder whether it is possible that in the junior grades the effects of socio-economic status and other exogenous social/cultural and biological variables might be 'more easily ameliorated by school-based accommodations' whereas at senior level 'the long-term effects of these conditions might be too strong for the schools to overcome' (Ryan and Adams 1995, 22). They also highlight the question of whether 'particular family processes begin to affect the social and academic domains of school adjustment as the child grows older and the school shifts its focus from a balanced concern of social and academic development to a much stronger emphasis on achievement' (Ryan and Adams 1995, 22). Eccles and Harold (1996) offer possible explanations for the decrease in parental involvement at school as children get older. These include a reflection

of a belief held by parents that they should begin to disengage from children as they get older, a feeling by parents that older children do not want them to be visible and a decrease in parents' feeling of efficacy to help their children as they progress through the school system.

2.4.3.5 <u>Involvement strategies</u>

The literature provides much helpful advice on how to involve parents in their children's education (e.g., Becker and Epstein 1982, Maring and Magelky 1990, Scott-Jones 1995). Some of this advice is for parents (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children 1999) and some for schools (e.g., Swick 1992, INTO 1997, Hornby 2002, Winter 2005). For Maring and Magelky (1990, 606), effective communication is the key to parent/community involvement. Ames, de Stefano, Watkins and Sheldon (1995, 21) found that 'parents' overall evaluations of the teacher, their sense of comfort with the school, and their reported level of involvement was higher when they receive frequent and effective communications.' Katz, Aidman, Reese and Clark (1996) offer practical pointers to enhance parent/teacher communication. These include letting parents know how and when they can contact the school, practising an open-door policy and eliciting parents' concerns and interests in advance of parent/teacher conferences. In the context of communication, a note of caution is sounded by Ames, Khoju and Watkins (1993, 3) who remind us that school-to-home communications often have negative content instead of containing instructionally-meaningful and personally relevant information which 'may serve to create "knowledgeable partners" in parents, give parents confidence in the school, establish positive beliefs about their child as a learner,

and foster an interest in their child's learning and progress.' Taking up this theme, Epstein (1992, 6) considers that 'information must be given to families by the schools on how to help in productive ways at all grade levels.'

Becker and Epstein (1982) offer fourteen techniques to involve parents. They group these into five categories as follows: (1) techniques that involve reading and books; (2) techniques that encourage discussions between parent and child; (3) techniques that specify certain informal activities at home to stimulate learning; (4) contracts between teacher and parents that specify a particular role for parents in connection with their children's school lessons or activities; and (5) techniques that develop parents' tutoring, helping, teaching, or evaluation skills (Becker and Epstein 1982, 90). Scott-Jones (1995) takes a different perspective, hypothesizing four levels of parental interactions that may contribute to children's school performance. She identifies these as valuing, monitoring, helping and doing and offers guidelines for parents under each heading. Dolan and Haxby (1995, 5) identify strategies to optimize participation including the provision of a non-threatening environment, transportation for parents who need it, the provision of quality childcare and incentives for attending and helping parents see the immediate application of strategies and how they can make a difference in the classroom or the home. Low-income parents in a study by Finders and Lewis (1994) suggest clarifying how parents can help, encouraging parents to be assertive, developing trust, building on home experiences and using parent expertise.

Haynes and Ben-Avie (1996, 47) make a distinction between the type of activities listed above and a 'parent involvement paradigm' which 'includes significant participation in decision-making in order to enhance the educational process and improve the overall climate of schools.'

2.4.3.6.   Planning

Effective planning for parent-school partnership is of vital importance (Haynes and Ben Avie 1996, Krasnow 1990). Comer and Haynes (1991, 271) stress that 'for parent involvement initiatives to be successful, they should be part of a contextually focused school improvement process designed to create positive relationships that support children's total development.' Encouraging schools to have 'a well-thought-out mechanism in place to harness the energy and talents of the parents,' Haynes and Ben Avie (1996, 46) note:

> A distinction may be made between schools that promote parental involvement as an integral aspect of schoolwide planning management and operational processes and that which is dependent on the personal initiative of either the individual teacher or the individual parents.

Good planning, in Haynes and Ben Avie's (1996, 48) view, involves what they term 'a political socialization process,' one that, instead of manipulating parents, works to help them understand how participation in programme and policy decisions can benefit themselves, their children and the community. Noting that research shows that schools in which pupils do well are characterised by good home-school relations, Bastiani (1993, 103) states that these schools go well beyond the basic legal requirements in developing effective, two-way communication, that they are accessible in a variety of ways and at all reasonable times and 'work hard to find ways in which parents can

encourage and support their children and provide them with practical help and, above all, build a sense of shared identity and common purpose.'

2.4.3.7 <u>Issues</u>

A study by Dolan and Haxby (1995) identified some of the barriers to participation, e.g., childcare and family responsibilities, thinking that the particular programme will not make a difference, feeling uncomfortable in the school or embarrassed by a lack of skills, transportation problems and dealing with personal problems. Epstein (1992) adds to the list, noting parental age and background and familial problems as potentially inhibiting factors. Finders and Lewis (1994, 51) found that many parents' own personal experiences create obstacles to involvement, with fear a recurring theme amongst parents in their study – fear of appearing foolish or being misunderstood and fear about their children's academic standing. Other obstacles come in the form of psychological constraints, i.e., hidden values, assumptions and ideological stances that get in the way of partnership because, to borrow from the words of Ryan and Adams (1995, 9), though writing in a different context, partnership is always mediated in some way through psychological processes. Factors come into play to create either favourable circumstances for or impediments to partnership, because, as Eccles and Harold (1996, 4) point out:

> The extent of family-school collaboration is affected by various school and teacher practices, characteristics related to reporting practices, attitudes regarding the families of the children in the school, and both interest in and understanding of how to effectively involve parents.

Eccles and Harold (1996, 4) contend that the question, "Why are parents and teachers not more involved with each other?" usually takes the form of "Why aren't parents more involved at school?" Asking the first of these questions

instead of the second has serious implications because 'when home-school relationships are evaluated exclusively in terms of parental behavior, critical questions are neither asked nor answered' (Lareau 1997, 705).

2.4.3.8 <u>Power</u>

Why do many parents 'feel disenfranchised from school settings' (Finders and Lewis 1994, 50)? One possible explanation is that power issues are inherent in the family/school relationship, a view held by some writers (e.g., Delpit 1993, Lareau 1996, Vincent 1996, Vincent and Tomlinson 1997, Todd and Higgins 1998) or, as Todd and Higgins (1998, 227) put it, 'power is both implicit and explicit in relationships between parents and professional educators.' Lareau (1996, 62) holds that, while the term family-school partnership 'raises the prospect of equal power,' it 'does not correctly describe the relations between parents and teachers.' Vincent and Tomlinson (1997, 366) see teachers as having, 'by virtue of their location within an institution and their professional knowledge, a built-in command over the relationship.'

Where does this power come from and how does it manifest itself? Lareau (1996, 61) underlines some areas where teachers have power, e.g., they can suspend children from school, prevent children from passing a grade because of behaviour problems and 'have legal and social prerogatives … to confront parents when they are concerned about children's welfare.' (Note that, in Ireland, under the Education Act, 1998, schools must have a policy relating to expulsion and suspension [Article 15:2b] and schools are restricted in their practices of retention under Department of Education and Science regulations

[Department of Education and Science 2003b]). Hobbins McGrath (2007, 1408-1409) points out that, though the teachers in her study were in a lower social position than the mothers, the information teachers had about children's experience in a child-care centre was a source of power for the teachers because 'mothers were beholden to the teachers for insight into their children' and that teachers 'appeared relatively unaware of how much power they had in their interactions with parents.' Mittler (2000, 151) attributes the imbalance of power to the fact that 'many parents are apprehensive and anxious about going to schools because they are still carrying the history of their own experiences of teachers and schooling.' Delpit (1993, 122) sees the power issue in school as a cultural one, contending that 'the upper and middle classes send their children to school with all the accoutrements of the culture of power,' further stating that 'children from other kinds of families operate within perfectly wonderful and viable cultures but not cultures that carry the codes or rules of power.'

Todd and Higgins (1998, 227) challenge 'the easy dichotomy of parents as powerless and professionals as powerful.' In their view, it is not surprising that parents are constructed with less power in home-school relations, as teachers 'view such relationships almost entirely from their own and the schools' point of view, with little understanding that this is the case, or that there is anything problematic about the situation.' The situation is further complicated by what Vincent (1996, 467) terms 'the contribution of "third-party" systems.' In other words, schools are operating within larger structures and 'educational professionals, even when placed in an apparent position of advocates, speaking on behalf of, and in support of, parents' are 'highly constrained in their actions

by the norms and values of the professional roles and environments within which they work' (Vincent 1996, 467).

2.4.3.9 <u>Teacher expertise/time</u>

The present project, or any parent-school project, could not be implemented without the help, support and expertise of teachers.

Vincent and Tomlinson (1997, 361) recommend that parents should 'seek to define for themselves new understandings of what constitutes an "appropriate" parental role.' Otherwise, some parents will 'be content to adopt the school's aims and viewpoints, but others will be untouched by the promises of "partnership" and remain distanced and alienated' (Vincent and Tomlinson 1997, 367). Epstein (1995, 217), cataloguing the results of parental involvement studies, writes that 'teachers' practices to involve families are as or more important than family background variables such as race or ethnicity, social class, marital status, or mothers' work status for determining whether and how parents become involved in their children's education.' This brings us to the question of teacher expertise in the area of involving parents in partnership and the time available to teachers to implement partnership. Vincent and Tomlinson's (1997, 361) recommendation above that parents should define new meanings of their role gives rise to the question, where and how does this happen? Is it likely that the parents, in, say a school in an area of economic disadvantage, will set about defining new meanings of their role, or, indeed, will feel that the school will welcome such developments, should they occur? The literature is not replete with examples of this happening. Or could

it be possible that school staff could help parents to do this? Alexander (1996, 17), speaking in the context of the U.K., believes that it 'would be more productive if schools and other services saw their main job as providing professional support for families and the community to solve problems themselves in order to prevent them from becoming crises.' On the one hand, this statement of Alexander's could be viewed as risible in terms of its unreal expectations of schools, whose overriding responsibility is to provide education for and deliver the curriculum to children and 'to provide a rich learning environment for pupils' (Conaty 1999, 476). As Todd and Higgins (1998, 231) remind us, teachers have a complex job and 'the additional responsibility of developing partnership with parents with a class of over 30 children is unrealistic.' On the other hand, Alexander's statement does serve to cause us to reflect on not just the areas of teacher expertise and knowledge on parent-school partnership, but on the time available for teachers to promote partnership. Looking first at the question of expertise, Conaty found that 54% of the teachers surveyed (all in schools within the Irish HSCL Scheme) had 'no understanding' of partnership' (Conaty 1999, 470). Hornby (2002, 11) stresses that, in order to develop partnerships, 'teachers need access to ongoing professional development activities.' Conaty (1999, 471) notes that there is an 'urgent need' within the HSCL Scheme for 'systematic and regular teacher development to allow each teacher to become a "home-school teacher" in attitude.'

There are also time issues. Schools in the HSCL Scheme have the services of the HSCL Coordinator to help them support parents in their children's

education. But what about class teachers in those schools and what about schools outside of the scheme? There are stringent requirements on Irish primary teachers with regard to timetabling in order to teach the eleven subjects of the Revised Primary Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999). The timetable, set out in the introductory statement of the curriculum, only leaves time in the teachers' day for assembly, lunch breaks and a very small amount of discretionary time which, typically, is used for extra-curricular activities. The Department of Education and Science (Department of Education and Science 2004) stipulates that one formal parent/teacher meeting, lasting two and a half hours, outside of school time, will be held each school year. Given the average class size of twenty-seven pupils (Department of Education and Science 2008a), this allows approximately five minutes per individual parent/teacher meeting, which, by any standard, is an extremely short time for a meeting of such importance. Furthermore, the DES (Department of Education and Science 2004) states that, if a parent is not able to be accommodated within the time set aside for the formal parent/teacher meeting, then another time must be arranged to meet that parent. A dilemma arises thus for school management. As management may not request teachers to remain in school outside of officially agreed hours, can time be taken from the teaching of the curriculum to meet parents? The communication of students' progress to parents is a requirement under the Education Act, 1998 (Article 22:2b). Parent/teacher meetings are one way of communicating progress and so, the meetings are typically used for this purpose. The DES has not, to date, indicated where, in the school day, time is to be made available to do as it recommends, viz., plan for, implement and review the school's relationship with parents and the wider school community,

including outside agencies (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003). Note in this context that 65% of Irish primary schools have teaching principals (Department of Education and Science 2008g)   whose time to manage the realization of partnership is even more curtailed than that of their administrative counterparts. This is a sobering thought, in the light of Epstein's (1995, 217) finding that teachers' practices to involve parents influence parents' actual involvement more than factors such as family background, race, ethnicity, social class, marital status, or mothers' work status.

2.4.3.10 Role Construction

The present project sought to gain an understanding of the meaning of parent-school partnership and this necessitated looking at the role of the parent in the child's education.

'Teachers tend to have a particular set of expectations of parents' role and behaviour, and thus when the parent fails to match this model, teachers are critical and accuse them of lack of support' (Crozier 1999, 324). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 3) suggest that 'even well-designed school programs inviting involvement will meet with only limited success if they do not address issues of parental role construction and parental sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school' When we are exhorted to implement partnership (Government of Ireland 1998) there is a tacit assumption that we all, parents and teachers, mean the same thing, that we understand each others' roles in the education of the children, each others' understanding of those roles and our expectations of each other in the execution of these roles. The literature

(e.g., Finders and Lewis 1994, Hobbins McGrath 2007) indicates that this understanding is not present in some cases. It may be a simple case of parents not knowing how to be involved in their child's education. Epstein (1992, 41) found that 'most parents help their children at home at times, but do not know whether they are doing the right things or doing things right.' Then we must consider the view of teachers on how parents should be involved. Finders and Lewis (1994, 50) admit that, prior to talking to low-income parents, their view of parental involvement conflicted with the views of many parents. Finders and Lewis (1994, 50) quote a teacher as saying of parents, 'Those who *need* to come, don't come.' (Italics in original). Finders and Lewis (1994, 50) conclude that, implicit in this statement, is the assumption that one of the main reasons for involving parents is to remediate the parents and that 'it is assumed that involved parents bring a body of knowledge about the purposes of schooling to match institutional knowledge.' In a study focusing on the daily exchanges between mothers and teachers in a child care centre during drop-off and pick-up times, Hobbins McGrath (2007, 1407) found that mothers and teachers tended to have different views of the children and expectations of one another that were rarely met to their satisfaction. Epstein (1992, 9) reports that, in a study, teachers in urban schools professed that most parents were not involved in their children's education and did not want to be, while parents in the same school believed that they were involved but that they needed more and better information from teachers on how to help at home. Lareau (1996, 60) points out that 'there is a fundamental disparity in the definitions of what parents mean by being involved' and that 'informing parents that they should be active is ineffectual because many parents … already believe that they are active.'

Furthermore, how parents construct their own role in education differs along class lines, a fact noted by Crozier (1997). Findings from a research project (Crozier 1997) on parental involvement showed that working-class parents strongly relied on the teachers to educate their children and did not see it as their own responsibility to take the initiative in terms of teaching their own children. Middle-class parents, whilst giving recognition to teachers' professionalism, 'saw their role as more interventionist' (Crozier 1997, 194). There is also a difference along class lines in how teachers construct parental involvement roles in schooling. A study by Becker and Epstein (1982) found that teachers teaching children of highly educated parents, who did not actively use parental involvement techniques reported that the parent-involvement techniques would work but that they chose not to use them. In the same study, teachers, teaching children of less educated parents, who did not actively use parental involvement techniques reported that the parents would not be able or willing to carry out activities related to the child's schoolwork at home. As Corbett, Wilson and Webb (1996, 31) point out, beliefs about cultural differences between school staff and the community can lead to a lack of respect and disregard for the unfamiliar culture of students and parents and staff may resist efforts to bring them into meaningful contact with parents.

In summary, the above examples cited from the literature have important implications, as we shall see. Finders and Lewis (1994) show that teachers' and parents' views on parental involvement conflicted. This backs up Lareau's (1996, 60) contention that that 'informing parents that they should be active is ineffectual because many parents … already believe that they are active.'

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Hobbins McGrath (2007) illustrates that the expectations of one another of the teachers and parents involved in the study were rarely met. Finally, Becker and Epstein's (1982) and Crozier's (1997) research shows how parents construct their own role in education differs along class lines and how teachers similarly construct parental role in education along class lines. Dauber and Epstein (1993, 69) advise that 'parents and teachers have different perspectives that must be recognized and taken into account in developing activities to improve parent involvement.'

A review by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) of psychological theory and research on why parents become involved in their children's schooling identified three major constructs believed to play a central part in parents' involvement decisions. The first of these, viz., parents' role construction, is relevant to this paragraph. (The second and third are the parents' sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school and general invitations, demands and opportunities for involvement.) Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 9) point out that 'parental role construction appears important to the involvement process primarily because it appears to establish a basic range of activities that parents will construe as important, necessary and permissible for their own actions with and on behalf of their children.' Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 10) found that the more a group and its members agree on an individual member's roles and role behaviours, the more productive is the group. The groups to which parents belong (e.g., family, school, workplace) will hold expectations about appropriate role behaviours. If the groups' expectations are similar, parents will most likely experience clarity about the

behaviours they are supposed to perform and consistent environmental pressure and support for performing those behaviours. Research from Epstein (1992) concurs with this view. Epstein (1992, 8) reports that 'teachers in highly discrepant environments (where teachers believe that they differ in attitudes from others at the school) report weaker programs of parent involvement.' In contrast, teachers in less discrepant environments, where teachers think similarly to other teachers, administrators and parents, report stronger, more comprehensive involvement programmes (Epstein 1992, 8). We can conclude from this that common expectations across groups (in this case, home and school) regarding parental involvement leads to clarity, consistency and support and that if these common expectations are absent there will be a concomitant lack of clarity, consistency and support.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1   Research methodology

When choosing a research methodology, the researcher must be crystal clear about the aims of the research. As Knight (2002, 210) puts it, 'the clearer you are about what you want to do and the claims you hope to make, the easier it is.' To remind the reader, the present research had three aims. First, it aimed to answer the question, 'What is parent-school partnership?'. Second, the project aimed to increase parent-school partnership in an urban primary school. Third, it aimed to establish how parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage can be involved in parent-school partnership.

The research questions are as follows:

      (a)   What is parent-school partnership?

      (b)   How can parent-school partnership be improved in an urban primary school?

      (c)   How can parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage be involved in parent-school partnership?

3.2   Action research

The research questions were addressed using an action research approach. To address Question (a), individual interviews and focus group interviews were used to gain a shared understanding of parent-school partnership. To address Question (b), parents of children in Junior Infants (the first year of primary

school) and Second Class (the fourth year of primary school) were involved in an action research project. To address Question (c), case studies, with parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage, were used within the action research. According to Zuber-Skerritt (1996, 83), the aims of action research are 'to bring about practical improvement, innovation, change or development of social practice, and the practitioners' better understanding of their practices.' This study aimed to improve practice in relation to parent-school partnership, so the approach suited that aim. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, 6) note that 'a distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of critically informed action which seem likely to lead to improvement, and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice.' The action research approach was therefore ideally suited to the project because parents and teachers, who would both be affected by any changes, collaboratively decided on a plan to improve current practice and then they jointly evaluated the action taken.

In reflecting on the term *action research,* its meaning is explained in the words themselves, since *action research* consists of both *action* and *research.* Hopkins (1993, 44) sees it as 'action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of improvement and reform.' Elliott (1991, 69) defines it as 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' and notes that 'the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge' (Elliott 1991, 49). According to Cohen and Manion (1994, 186), 'action

research is small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention'. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, 5) provide the following definition:

> Action research is a form of *collective* self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out … The approach is only action research when it is *collaborative*, though it is important to realize that the action research of the group is achieved through the *critically examined action* of individual group members.

Carr and Kemmis (1986, 164) provide a definition of *educational action research*:

> Educational action research is a term used to describe a family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programs, and systems planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are *implemented*, and then systematically submitted to *observation*, *reflection and change*. Participants in the action being considered are integrally involved in all of these activities.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) point out that the two essential aims of all action research are *to improve* and *to involve.*

Figure 9: Lewin's model of action research as interpreted by Kemmis (1980)

(Copied from Elliott 1991, 67)
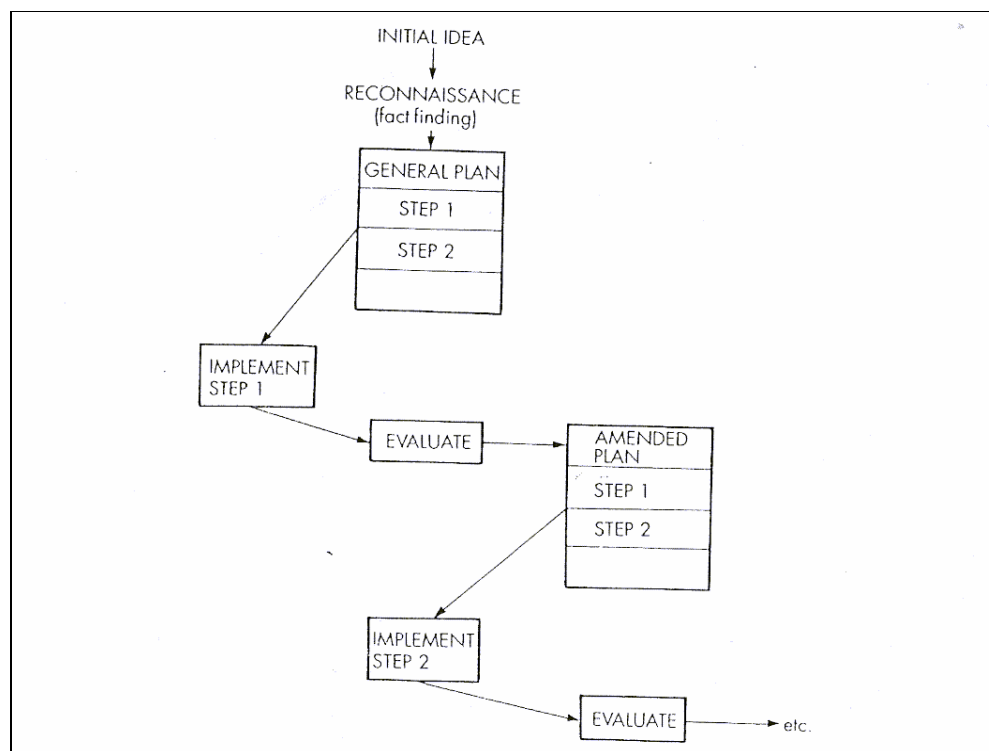
Action research, which developed from the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946), can be described as a series of steps, with each step having four stages: planning, acting, observing, reflecting (McNiff 1988). Lewin's original model (Figure 9, above) has been developed by others interested in educational research. Amongst these are John Elliott, based at the University of East Anglia, and Stephen Kemmis, of Deakin University in Australia. Elliott (1991, 69) describes Kemmis's interpretation of the process as follows:

> The basic cycle of activities is identifying a general idea, reconnaissance, general planning, developing the first action step, implementing the first action step, evaluation, revising the general plan. From this basic cycle the researchers then *spiral* into developing the second action step, implementation, evaluation, revising general plan, developing the third action step, implementation, evaluation and so on.

While conceding that Lewin's model 'is an excellent basis for starting to think about what action research involves' (Elliott 1991, 70), Elliott argues that the general idea should be allowed to shift, further contending that reconnaissance should involve analysis as well as fact-finding and that it should constantly recur in the spiral of activities, not just at the start. Elliott reminds us that implementation of the steps is not always easy and that we should not evaluate the effects of an action until we have monitored the extent to which the action has been implemented. Taking these criticisms into consideration, Elliott produced a more elaborate spiral than Lewin's, as interpreted by Kemmis (1980). (See Figure 10, next page.)

Figure 10 : A revised version of Lewin's Model of Action Research (Elliott 1991, 67)
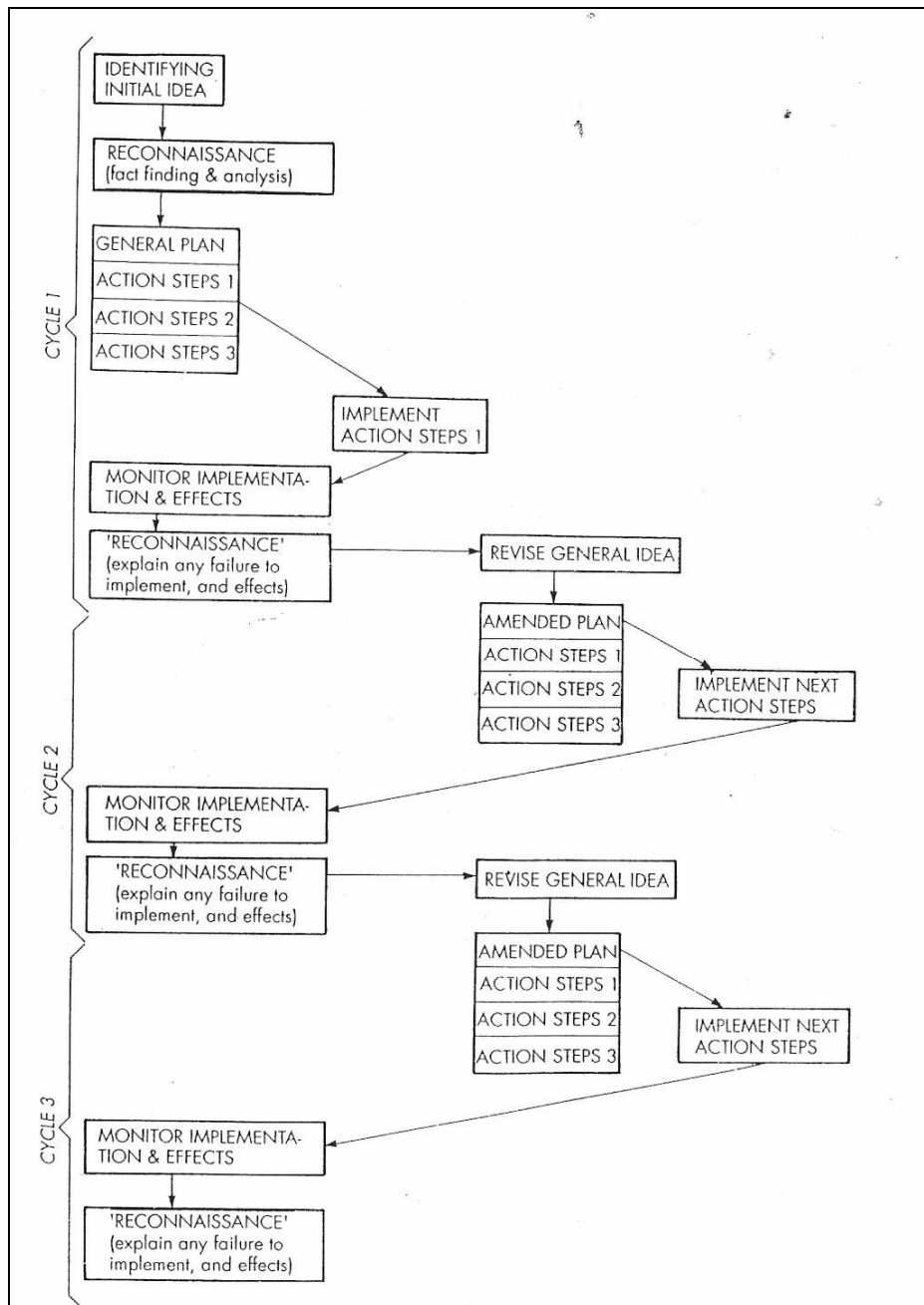
Since analysis will be incorporated into every stage of the present project and since Elliott (1991) has identified very clear steps for the teacher/researcher to follow, Elliott's model will be used for the present project.

3.2.1 Criticisms and difficulties of action research

For a researcher who has chosen a methodology it is necessary to be aware of criticisms which have been leveled against it. Indeed, 'more than a few respected philosophers of education dismiss action research out of hand' (Newby 1997, 78). One criticism is the lack of clarity around 'internal action research processes' (Dickens and Watkins 1999, 134). The present researcher used Elliott's framework (described below) to clarify the internal action research processes. McNiff (1988) contends, speaking of action research in the context of its use by teacher researchers, that the word 'model' implies an element of prescription and a rigidity that denies the spontaneous life of the classroom, and that teachers are told *what* to do rather than *how* to do it. The action research for the present project was collaborative, which necessitated flexibility, with parents and teachers deciding on and implementing action based on a needs analysis. This process could not and did not contain any element of 'rigidity.' Hopkins (1993, 55) is also concerned that action research is based upon a deficit model, that it is 'a deficit model of professional development' (Hopkins 1993, 55). In this researcher's view, there is always place, in her own professional life at least, for a critical look at what might be improved.

Connolly (2004, 29-30), Robson (1993, 439-440) and Dickens and Watkins (1999, 131) present a number of criticisms of action research identified by other writers. It has been criticized as either producing research with little action or action with little research (Foster 1972) and criticized as lacking the

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rigour of true scientific research (Cohen and Manion 1980, Atkinson and Delamont 1985). Dickens and Watkins (1999, 131) point out that 'individuals seeking to solve problems in complex, real-time settings find that the problems change under their feet, often before the more in-depth iterative search for solutions suggested by action research has achieved meaningful results.' With regard to the criticisms in this paragraph, the present project consisted of both action and research; the action was not just action for its own sake but was carefully and rigorously analysed to generate new knowledge. The researcher was very aware of the 'complex, real-time settings' (Dickens and Watkins 1999, 131) and of the difficulties such settings might and, indeed, did, bring, but then these difficulties were observed and the knowledge that observation brought deepened our understanding of the parent-teacher partnership.

Cohen and Manion (1984, 47) add to the list of criticisms, stating that the sample used in action research is restricted and unrepresentative, that there is little or no control over independent variables and that the findings are not generalizable but usually restricted to the environment in which the research is carried out. This point, made by Cohen and Manion, will be listed as a limitation of the study.

The centrality of the researcher in qualitative research has been identified by McQueen and Knussen (2002, 198) who note that this centrality 'is hard work, and it can be very time consuming' as 'qualitative research demands an extra

level of involvement on the part of the researcher.' A difficulty, rather than a criticism, associated with action research is that it places heavy demands on the teacher researcher, who will also 'be working in the interactive cut-and-thrust of demanding classrooms and demanding schools, using their nerve endings to seek for the time and opportunity to put their research theories to practical tests' (Dadds 1993, 31). It requires a hefty time commitment on the part of the researcher (Bassey 1998, 93). Similarly, high degrees of patience and flexibility are needed as action research is a complex process and is not 'a neat, orderly activity that allows participants to proceed step by step to the end of the process' (Stringer 1996, 17). Risk-taking is inherent in action research and action researchers have to 'dare to cross discourse boundaries' (Somekh 2000, 115). Certainly, as this researcher experienced, flexibility and an extended period of pre-action information gathering was required to address the complex process associated with enhancing the process of involving parents in partnership.

3.2.2 Characteristics of Action Research

Before undertaking the project, the researcher had to have knowledge of the characteristics of action research so that the process would incorporate these characteristics.

Action research is *situational* in that it is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and trying to solve the problem within that context (Cohen and Manion 1994). It is *self-evaluative* as modifications are continuously evaluated within the ongoing situation, with the aim of improving some aspect

of practice (Cohen and Manion 1994). Action research is also a *social* process, carried out in settings in which people try to understand how they are formed and re-formed as individuals and in relation to one another (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998). It is *participatory* with team members taking part directly or indirectly in implementing the research (Cohen and Manion 1994). Action research is *practical* and *usually collaborative.* In action research, people examine the acts which link them with others in social interaction; it is research done 'with' others (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998), though Cohen and Manion (1994) remind us that this is not inevitable. Action research is *critical,* a process which provides a mechanism for people to contest and change inefficient, unjust or alienating ways of interpreting and describing their world, and of relating to others (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998).

3.2.3   Advantages of action research

Moore (2000, 58) sees the real, concrete and visible elements of action research as its main advantage coupled with the fact that 'something exists at the end of the day,' i.e., a tangible outcome. It is 'a powerful method for determining change' (Bassey 1998, 93). The people who will be affected by planned changes will, themselves, have the responsibility for deciding on the course of action leading to the changes (Winter 1996, 14) and will be enabled to build positive working relationships and good communication (Stringer 1996). In the present action research, the parents were partners in the research process and decided on the course of action leading to the change.   Professionals are enabled to enter into a study of their own work and working circumstances (Dadds 1993, 229). As a result, their self-understanding will be extended and

transformed (Carr and Kemmis 1986, 198). Action research may result in an improvement in practice because, with action research, there must be 'a continuous process of clarification of our vision in the area of social justice, of recognizing the constraints on practice, and of developing the capabilities necessary to realize those visions' (Noffke 1995, 5).

3.2.4 Steps involved in action research

Since there is 'no definitive approach to action research' (Dickens and Watkins, 1999, 127) it can be daunting for the small-time researcher. Elliott (1991), however, provides a clear description for the teacher-researcher of the steps involved. As these steps are implemented in the present project, it will be necessary to remember Connolly's (2004, 30) contention that 'the criterion for success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully, but whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understanding of the practices, and the situations in which they practise.'

Elliott's guidelines will now be presented in summary form. (For full description, see Elliott 1991, 72-89),

3.2.4.1 Identifying and clarifying the general idea

Elliott (1991, 72) defines the *general idea* as 'essentially a statement which links an idea to action.' The criteria for selecting the general idea are 'whether the situation it refers to (a) impinges on one's field of action; and (b) is something one would like to change or improve on' (p. 72). The original

general idea might need to be revised constantly, as one goes through the action research process.

3.2.4.2 Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance can be sub-divided into: (a) describing the facts of the situation; and (b) explaining the facts of the situation. One needs to describe as fully as possible the nature of the situation which one wishes to improve, an exercise which can in fact lead one to change one's understanding of the original idea. Having described the facts of the situation, it is necessary to explain them. One therefore 'moves from a *description* of the facts to a *critical analysis* (italics in original) of the context in which they arise' (Elliott 1991, 73).

3.2.4.3 Constructing the general plan

According to Elliott (1991, 75) the general plan of action should contain:

1. A revised statement of the general idea

2. A statement of the factors one is going to change or modify to improve the situation and the actions one will undertake to do this

3. A statement of negotiations one has had, or will have to conduct with others, before undertaking the proposed action plan

4. A statement of the resources one will need

5. A statement of the ethical framework governing the access to and release of information

3.2.4.4 <u>Developing the next action steps</u>

This means deciding on which of the courses of action outlined in the general plan one will follow, and how both the process of implementation and its effects will be monitored.

3.2.4.5 <u>Implementing the next action steps</u>

Elliott warns that implementing a course of action may take some time and, even if the action step is easily implemented, 'troublesome side effects' (p. 76) may occur. One may then need to move into reconnaissance to understand the cause of these. This in turn will lead to modifications and changes in the general idea and general plan of action.

3.3 **Case studies**

A research method needed to be identified, within the action research, to answer the question, 'How can parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage be involved in parent-school partnership?'. The researcher considered that the use of case studies, conducted with parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage, would enable her to find the answer to the question. O'Leary (2004, 116) states:

> Case studies … have much in common with methodologies generally used to 'delve deeper.' That is they allow for in-depth exploration; are an examination of subtleties and intricacies; attempt to be holistic; explore processes as well as outcomes; and investigate the context and setting of a situation.

Mark (1996, 39) defines the case study as 'the intensive study of a single individual, family, group, or other social grouping.' Gerring (2007, 20) states that 'a *case study* (italics in original) may be understood as the intensive study

of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population).' Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, 316) state that, in case studies, 'naturalistic everyday, cultural and interactional phenomena are studied in their own right and in their own territory.'

O'Leary (2004, 116) lists the advantages of case studies. She considers they have 'an intrinsic value,' that they can be used 'to debunk a theory,' that they 'bring new variables to light,' that they 'provide supportive evidence for a theory' and that 'they can be used collectively to form the basis of a theory.'

Limitations of the case study approach are noted by Bell (1999). Crosschecking of information is difficult where a single researcher chooses the area for study and chooses which material to include in the final report. Generalization is not always possible (Bell 1999).

O'Leary (2004) states that the methodological approaches associated with case studies are 'eclectic and broad' and may involve a number of data-gathering methods, e.g., surveys, interviews, observation and document analysis and that they can also involve the use of a number of methodologies. The present project used the semi-structured interview as the data-gathering method and the case studies involved some action research.

3.4   Research techniques

Research techniques can be both quantitative and qualitative. Amongst researchers, 'the quantitative-qualitative divide in educational, sociological and

psychological research is alive and well' (Bayliss 2004) with 'dogmatic positions' often taken in favour of either qualitative or quantitative research' (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 28) and 'debates about the "right" understanding of science' not settled yet (Flick 2006, 34). Quantitative researchers collect facts, study the relationship of one set of facts to another and use scientific measurement techniques that are likely to produce quantified and, if possible, generalizable conclusions (Bell 1999, 5). The advantage of this type of research is that it is possible 'to measure the reactions of a great many people to a limited set of questions, thus facilitating comparison and statistical aggregation of the data' (Quinn Patton 1990, 14). Researchers using a qualitative approach 'are more concerned to understand individuals' perceptions of the world,' seeking 'insight rather than statistical analysis' (Bell 1999, 5). Qualitative methods 'typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases' which 'increases understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduces generalizability' (Quinn Patton 1990, 14). Qualitative researchers use a variety of methods 'hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand' (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, 3). In any one research project, qualitative and quantitative research may be, and frequently are, combined as a means of support for each other, to provide a more comprehensive picture of the issue being researched and to provide triangulation (Flick 2006). Indeed, there is a haziness in demarcation between qualitative and quantitative research and the differences between them are sometimes not clear-cut (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000, Mason 2002, McQueen and Knussen 2002, Silverman 2005).

Both qualitative and quantitative tools were used in this research. The qualitative tools used were semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews and the quantitative tool used was the questionnaire. These research tools will now be described.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

An interview is 'a conversation with a purpose' (Robson 1993, 228) 'defined by face-to-face interaction' (Knight 2002, 61). The interview as a research tool is flexible and adaptable, with 'the potential of providing rich and highly illuminating material' (Robson 1993, 229). That said, interviews are time-consuming, it may be difficult to get co-operation from potential interviewees, skill is needed on the interviewer's part and 'biases are difficult to rule out' (Robson 1993, 229).

Compared with the structured interview the semi-structured interview is less formal (Vogrinc 2004). Wragg (1984, 184) states that, for a semi-structured interview, 'a carefully worded interview schedule is assembled' but that more latitude is permitted. While the present researcher had questions formulated in advance the interviews were semi-formal, with 'the interviewer free to modify the sequence of questions, change the wording, explain them or add to them' (Connolly 2005, 85). While there may be a danger that interviewees may not stay with the subject in hand (Knight 2002) it was important not to limit the amount of relevant information that interviewees might give. The aim of the present researcher was to enable interviewees to provide all the information relevant to the topic (Vogrinc 2004, 184) and to allow the interviewee 'to

develop a story or narrative' (Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur 2006, 75). Advised protocols (e.g., Nisbet and Watt 1984, Leedy 1997, Robson 1993, Vogrinc 2004, Connolly 2005) were observed and ethical procedures (Wragg 1984, Leedy 1997) followed.

The reasons for choosing the interview questions will be presented in Chapters Four and Six, when the project is described. (See p. 200 and Appendix XII for interview questions.)

3.4.2 Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were used in the present project as a means of gaining a common understanding of parent-school partnership. Focus groups are 'group discussions exploring a specific set of issues' (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999, 4) and are a way of listening to people, learning from them and creating lines of communication (Morgan 1998). They use a semi-structured questioning approach which relies on participants' responses (Litoselliti 2003, 3). Focus groups are distinguished from other group interviews by the use of group interaction to generate data and insights (Flick 2006) and 'focused in the sense that they involve some kind of collective activity around a small number of issues' (Litoselliti 2003, 2).

Guidelines are readily available for conducting focus groups (e.g., Krueger 1998 and 1998a, Morgan 1998, Litoselliti 2003). The typical composition of a focus group is 7-10 participants, selected because they have characteristics relating to the focus group topic (Krueger 1998a). The number of groups will

depend on the needs of the study but 'it is too risky to build a research project around a single focus group, as this would make only limited claims about that particular group of people, and could hinder both comparative and in-depth exploration of the topic' (Litoselliti 2003, 4). Litoselliti (2003) observes that a typical number is between four and six groups. In conducting the group, Krueger (1998, 3) holds that the first principle is to ask questions in a conversational manner, that 'conversational questions are essential to create and maintain an informal environment.' The questions should be predetermined, open-ended (Litoselliti 2003) and clear (Krueger 1998). The interviewer must ensure that one participant or a small group of participants does not dominate the interview (Flick 2006) and that the proceedings do not turn into a chat or the presentation of endless anecdotes (Flick 2006). The fact that the data produced 'will be influenced by the presence, role, and perceived background' (Litoselliti 2003, 5) of the interviewer needs to be acknowledged when interpreting the data.

A difficulty relating to focus groups is that they are 'demanding to organize, conduct, moderate and analyse successfully' (Litoselliti 2003, 9). A further difficulty can be encountered in getting people to participate and travel to the common venue (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999).

Difficulties experienced with focus group interviews in the present project will be outlined in Chapter Four.

The same questions were used for focus group interviews and individual interviews during the pre-action spiral (p. 200). A different set of interview questions was used for the case studies (Appendix XII).

3.4.3 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used in the present project at the post-action stage to evaluate the actions taken. Questionnaires must be carefully planned to give the researcher the needed information and must be easy to analyse and interpret (Bell 1999). The literature provides much useful advice, which was helpful to the present researcher, on designing questionnaires (e.g., Youngman 1984, Leedy 1997). Guidelines include keeping the questionnaire as short as possible and organizing the items so that they are easy to read and complete (Leedy 1997) and being careful about how questions and statements are worded (Knight 2000)

3.4.4 Grounded Theory

Individual and focus group interviews conducted in the present study yielded a large amount of data which had to be 'reduced in some way to be meaningfully communicated in a dissertation' (Rudestam and Newton 2001, 43). Rudestam and Newton (2001, 43) note:

> One method for analyzing such data is called the *constant comparative method* (italics in original). Data are systematically coded into as many themes and meaning categories as possible. As the categories emerge and are refined, the researcher begins to consider how they relate to one another and what the theoretical implications are. Gradually the theoretical properties of the meaning categories crystallize and form a pattern. The pattern that emerges is sometimes called "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and is 'a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed' (Strauss and Corbin 1994, 273). Mertens (2005, 242) states that 'the defining characteristic of grounded theory is that the theoretical propositions are not stated at the outset of the study.' Instead, 'generalizations (theory) emerge out of the data themselves and not prior to data collection' (Mertens 2005, 242).

Lichtman (2006, 27) observes that researchers using grounded theory are 'interested in the actions, interactions, and social process of people.' In the present research, data from parental interviews was systematically gathered and recorded. The data from each interview was read and re-read and 'constant comparisons' (Rudestam and Newton 2001) were made between the interviews. Arising from this constant comparing, themes were extracted from parental responses which were then categorized under broad headings corresponding to the themes, e.g., communication, co-operation, involvement, etc. Where there was a large number of varied responses under the broad headings, these responses were further broken down into sub-categories, enabling us to get an in-depth view of parental understandings under each question heading and thus to develop theory. It is important to note that the present researcher did not start from what Goulding (1999, 6) terms 'a blank agenda.' Goulding (1999, 6) notes that Glaser (1978) 'discusses the role of existing theory and its importance to sensitising the researcher to the conceptual significance of emerging concepts and categories.' Goulding (1999, 6) reminds us of the vital importance of the researcher's use of this prior

knowledge and, citing Glaser (1978), states that, 'without this grounding in extant knowledge, pattern recognition would be limited to the obvious and the superficial, depriving the analyst of the conceptual leverage from which to develop theory.' Thus, the present researcher was able to use her reading of the literature, in particular the literature on Epstein's Typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991), to sensitise her to the theory emerging from the data.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethics refer to 'rules of conduct,' to 'general principles of what one ought to do' (Robson 1993, 29).

Ethical issues crop up at every stage of the research (Flick 2006). At the outset, participants must be made aware of the aims of the research (Flick 2006). Informed consent must be obtained from the participants (Cohen and Manion 1994, Flick 2006, Kilbourn 2006). The anonymity of the participants must be protected and confidentiality assured (Cohen and Manion 1994).

The outcomes of the work must be 'objective and truthful in the sense that the understanding of meaning is directed towards the attainment of possible consensus among the actors' (Winter 1996, 17). The researcher has to be scrupulously careful that the findings 'are genuinely based on critical investigation' of all the data and 'do not depend on a few well-chosen examples' (Silverman 2005, 211). Silverman (2005, 211) refers to the latter as 'anecdotalism.'

The researcher must be aware of what he/she brings to the research and how this 'shapes the way the data are interpreted and treated' (Hall 1996, 30).

The use of action research brings its own ethical requirements. Because, in the present project, people's thoughts and opinions were sought and used to inform action and because these thoughts and opinions may reflect private experience (e.g., in the case of parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage), tact and sensitivity was required (Stringer 1996, 41). The researcher had to take into account the effect of the research on the participants and 'act in such a way as to preserve their dignity as human beings' (Cohen and Manion 1994, 359). McNiff and Whitehead (2005, 34-35) identify three broad categories of ethical issues in action research. These are negotiating access (getting permission from everyone involved), protecting the participants (promising confidentiality and anonymity and granting permission to withdraw) and assuring good faith (letting people know one can be trusted).

In the present study, letters were sent to parents inviting participation in the research. (See Appendices I, II and III.) The letters indicated that the research was being conducted for a degree with the University of Hull and that the data obtained for the research would be included in a thesis which could be openly consulted. It was also stated in the letters that, in keeping with university procedures, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

The researcher took special care in her communication with the parents whose case studies are presented in Chapter Six, the chapter dealing with parents of

children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage. The researcher outlined to these parents the objective criteria set down by the DES to assess levels of disadvantage (Department of Education and Science 2005b). The researcher discussed these criteria with each of the case study parents in relation to themselves. The researcher then asked for and received each parent's consent to include the data given by the parents in the section of the research dealing with parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage. Anonymity and confidentiality was assured.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PRE-ACTION SPIRAL

4.1 Introduction

The action research consisted of a pre-action spiral, two main action spirals and case studies of six parents. The pre-action spiral describes the work involved in developing a common understanding of parent-school partnership and will be described in this chapter. The main action spirals describe the action undertaken for the research with Junior Infant parents and Second Class parents respectively and will be described in Chapter Five. The case studies consist of an in-depth exploration of how parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage can be involved in parent-school partnership and will be presented in Chapter Six.

Figure 11: Outline of action research
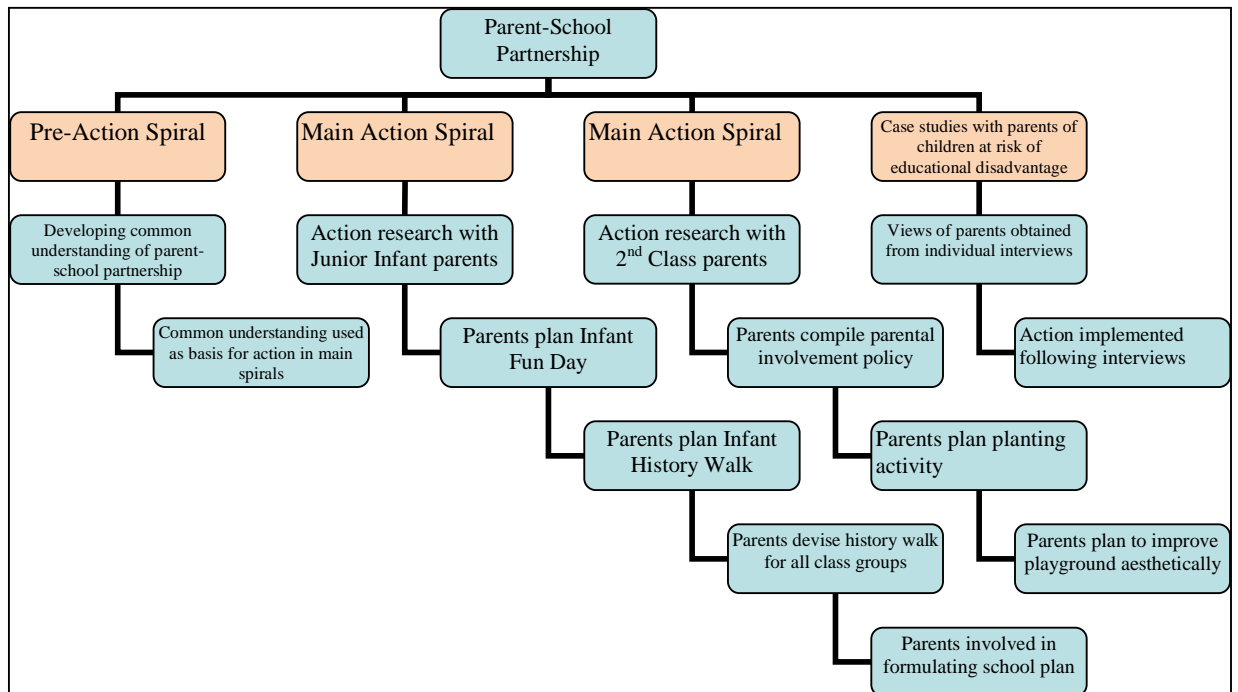
4.2   Pre-action spiral

The pre-action spiral action will now be described, using Elliott's framework.

(See Chapter Three, pp. 181-183, for description of Elliott's framework.) The

pre-action spiral consists of three mini-spirals.

4.2.1   Pre-action research spiral: Mini-Spiral One

4.2.1.1 Identifying and clarifying the general idea

According to Elliott (1991, 72), the general idea referred to in Step One of his

model 'is essentially a statement which links an idea to action.' The general

idea under consideration here is parental partnership in education. Elliott (1991,

72) advises that the criteria for selecting the general idea are 'whether the

situation it refers to (a) impinges on one's field of action; and (b) is something

one would like to change or improve on.' Partnership with parents is now not

simply a worthy aspiration but a statutory requirement under the Education

Act, 1998. While building partnership with parents is part of St. Mary's ethos,

and partnership is actively promoted and nurtured through the HSCL Scheme,

the difficulty of involving parents whose children may be at risk of educational

disadvantage had been noted and it was hoped to address this issue through the

action research.

4.2.1.2 Reconnaissance

At the start of the action research project the general idea was indeed 'general'

in the mind of the researcher, despite the fact that it had been given a more

specific and focussed dimension in the research questions, viz., *How can*

parent-school partnership be improved in an urban primary school? and *How*

can parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage be involved in parent-school partnership?. With the general idea identified, the second part of Elliott's first step, i.e., *clarifying* this idea, seemed a logical way forward. The way chosen to do this was to gain a common understanding of the meaning of parent-school partnership from parents in the school.

4.2.1.3 <u>Constructing the general plan</u>

The goal now was to develop a shared understanding of parent-school partnership in St. Mary's. This shared understanding would add to the understanding gleaned through the development of the conceptual framework in Chapter Two (pp. 90-105) and would be an additional part of this conceptual framework. To remind the reader, the conceptual framework is 'the scaffold, framework of ideas, questions, and theories, methodologies and methods' (Wisker 2006, quoted in Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur 2006, 50) which help the researcher to develop the ideas underpinning the research. In addition, this shared understanding would help to answer the first research question, 'What is parent-school partnership?'. It would also serve to inform the action to be taken. Finally, the shared understanding acquired at the pre-action stage would be used for comparison purposes when evaluating the action.

Bearing in mind that two key elements of action research are participation and collaboration (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988), it was necessary for the researcher to involve others in the research process. The key partners in parent-school partnership are parents and teachers and, so, an advising group was required for the pre-action work which would be representative of these

partners. Mindful of the fact that one of the research questions asks, 'How can parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage be involved in parent-school partnership?', the researcher, in consultation with the HSCL Coordinator, identified parents fulfilling the criteria for educational disadvantage as laid down by the DES (Department of Education and Science 2005b). For some of these parents, time and other constraints precluded their participation as advisors. Two mothers consented to take part, both fulfilling the DES criteria. The writer explained to the two parents that she was interested in involving parents fulfilling these criteria; the parents had no difficulty with this. The writer invited the HSCL Coordinator to become an advisor, as her knowledge and expertise in the area of parental partnership would be invaluable in this context.

4.2.1.4 Developing the next action steps

What was required at this time, i.e., the start of the 2004/2005 school year, was to (a) develop a conceptual framework, i.e., a shared understanding of parent-school partnership; and (b), in order to do this, to identify the best way of arriving at this shared understanding. Arriving at this understanding would necessitate the use of appropriate tools or techniques and the decision regarding which tools to use was taken by the researcher, given her 'special competence' (Elden and Levin 1991, 140) in the area of research.

In the literature on action research (e.g., Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, Elliott 1991, Rudestam and Newton 2001) a number of tools or techniques are suggested for use by the researcher using the action research approach. These

include document analysis, anecdotal records, field notes and photography (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). While all of these tools could be, and, in fact, were, used to some extent during the research, the principal tool selected for use at this stage was the interview, which was used both in an individual and focus group setting. The reason for this choice was that, in order to arrive at a common understanding of parent-school partnership, a certain number of questions that needed to be answered (provided below, p. 200) were identified. Miretzky (2004, 814) argues for 'the recognition of the importance of talk among parents and teachers – both as a research methodology and as a desirable outcome.' The interviews would be semi-structured, i.e., while specific pre-planned questions would be asked, the interviewees would have 'the latitude to talk about themselves and issues that connect with their own individual and unique experiences' (Burgess et al. 2006, 73). The researcher thus hoped to obtain the 'rich data' referred to by Maxwell (1996, 95).

The framework would be arrived at through the use of focus group interviews and through individual interviews. The focus group, described by Litoselliti (2003, 2) as 'a synergetic approach that produces a range of opinions, ideas and experiences, and thus generates insightful information' seemed an appropriate way to obtain the 'multiple views and attitudes' (Litoselliti 2003, 2) required to build a common understanding of parent-school partnership. Individual interviews would be used to obtain data from parents. The individual interviews would also provide triangulation to support the validity of the research.

The plan was that the writer would carry out all of the interviews. Having just one interviewer would help to support the reliability of the research process which should be able to provide results 'that do not vary according to the particular persons undertaking the research' (Denscombe 2002, 100).

It was decided that the parents involved in the focus group and individual interviews would be limited to parents of Junior Infants (i.e., children in their first year at primary school, aged four to five years) and parents of Second Class children (i.e., children in their fourth year at school, aged eight to nine years). The rationale for the choice of these two classes was as follows:
 Parents of Junior Infants would have an opportunity to be involved in the school over a long period as their children were just starting school and parents of Second Class children would have experience of the school system and would therefore be able to contribute to an understanding of partnership in a different way to parents of Junior Infants. It was expected that there would be parents in both groups who may be experiencing disadvantage; these parents would be able to add to the body of knowledge from yet another vantage point.

Having decided on the interview as a research tool, the next step was to formulate questions, the answers to which would enable us to reach a common understanding of parent-school partnership.

Taking the advice on planning for focus group interviews provided by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996, 37-55), it was first necessary to identify what information we did and did not want to obtain from the focus group and individual interviews. At this point, we did not need to know the current state

of parent-school partnership or how partnership could be improved. The information required was an understanding of the meaning of partnership, as viewed by the parents, as well as an understanding of their feelings on parent-school partnership, both from a general point of view and from their own immediate experience. Issues surrounding partnership needed to be identified, both from a general and personal viewpoint. Since what we needed was an understanding of partnership at *local* level, the questions would not be based on any partnership paradigm found in the literature (e.g., Connors and Epstein 1995).

The questions for the focus group and individual interviews were as follows:

1. What, in your opinion, is parent-school partnership?

2. How important is it to have partnership between parents and school?

3. What do you feel about parent-school partnership in general?

4. From your own experience, what do you feel about parent-school partnership?

5. In general, what are the issues relating to parent-school partnership?

6. From your experience, what are the issues relating to parent-school partnership?

4.2.1.5 <u>Implementing the next action steps</u>

The first step was to pilot the interview questions. It was decided to do this with groups of parents rather than with individuals in order to gain as wide a view as possible on the questions. The interview questions were piloted with three groups of parents to assess their suitability and usefulness for the task in hand. The writer carried out the interviews and the advising parents and HSCL

Coordinator were present when possible. (At this early stage in the research, one of the barriers to parent-school partnership was becoming very apparent, i.e., that, in spite of best intentions, parents, because of the many pressures of life, are often not available for school business.)

In order to assess the suitability of the questions for parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage, the first pilot group interview was carried out with a group of parents of children involved in the School Completion Programme. (See Chapter One, pp. 16-18 for description of School Completion Programme.) At least one child of each parent had a high rate of school absenteeism. None of the parents had a child in Junior Infants or Second Class in the school. The other two groups each consisted of five parents (randomly selected) whose children were not in either Junior Infants or Second Class and therefore would not be involved in the main research. The pilot group interviews took place in January/February 2005.

During the pilot interviews, difficulties were encountered. Some participants tended to pay scant notice to the actual questions and to have great interest in providing anecdotes to illustrate their experiences of parent-school partnership. It proved very difficult to keep participants on track. The writer was starkly reminded that 'the functioning of the real world' (Cohen and Manion 1994, 186) does not always comply with carefully laid plans. When the material acquired through the pilot interviews was examined it was observed that, while the questions were often not directly answered, much valuable information on the topic of parent-school partnership was gleaned through the conversations and anecdotes. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) hold that action research is a

process through which all the individuals taking part try to understand how their knowledge shapes their sense of identity and agency and there was a sense that this was happening during these piloting sessions. Having considered the material acquired during the pilot interviews, the researcher decided that the questions were effective tools to elicit the required understanding on parent-school partnership and, so, the questions were retained in their original format.

We now needed to set up focus groups and get the consent of individual parents to participate in interviews. Advice was sought from the advising parents who recommended sending out a letter asking all parents in Junior Infants and Second Class if they would be interested in coming to a meeting to discuss ways in which partnership between home and school could be increased. This was done (Appendix I), and the only parents who replied were the parents who were already committee members of the Parents' Association.

The writer then decided to approach parents individually to ask if they would agree to come in to the school at a time suitable to them to be interviewed individually or to be part of a group to discuss parent-school partnership. This selection process was truly random; the writer stood at the entrance to the appropriate classrooms and requested those passing in and out to take part in the research. This proved to be a frustrating exercise. Parents did not seem to be willing to commit to this. On several occasions, parents agreed to be part of a group or to come for individual interview, only to cancel later for various reasons. There was a problem in that parents seemed either reluctant or unable to engage in dialogue of this kind or that the researcher was approaching the process in an ineffective way.

At this point a stalemate was reached. The research process seemed to be grinding to a halt. No information had been gleaned which would lead to a common understanding of parent-school partnership - or had it?   Litoselliti (2003, 6), speaking of focus groups, holds that 'the non-verbal communication among participants signals people's responses' and 'is therefore crucial.' What we had here could perhaps be interpreted as a non-verbal response. Could the reluctance of parents to be involved at this stage of the research be telling us something? Litoselliti (2003, 6) refers to 'a web of responses.' This is an interesting image as, in a web, the space, or emptiness, between the threads is an integral part of the image as a whole. Reflecting on the space where we expected a multitude of words to be, we were left with the following questions:

1.   Could it be that the parents requested to take part view this part of the research as 'a theoretical exercise' with no immediately visible, practical benefit for their children's education?

2.   Do some parents have a fear of coming to the school?

3.   Would some parents find both participating in an interview and involvement in a focus group intimidating?

Lewin's (1946) steps of planning, acting and observing had been followed, and it was now time for the second mini-cycle to begin.

4.2.2   Pre-action research spiral: Mini-Spiral Two

4.2.2.1 Identifying and clarifying the general idea

At this point, the general idea remained the same as heretofore. It was aimed to increase parent-school partnership in St. Mary's, but the way to gain a common understanding of this partnership needed to be reconsidered.

4.2.2.2 <u>Reconnaissance</u>

Bearing in mind that 'action research must be treated as a paradigm in its own right with its own particular commitment to practical rather than purist views of knowledge' (Dadds 1993, 230) the way forward needed to be reassessed. This does not mean that rigorous research standards had to be abandoned but it does mean that, because what we were dealing with was 'not an orderly structure' (Winter 1996, 15), we had to modify and adjust our data-collecting method if we were to make progress. The goal remained the same as for Mini-Spiral One, i.e., to develop a shared understanding as a basis for the action research project. The means of working towards that goal needed to be re-defined.

4.2.2.3 <u>Constructing the general plan</u>

Remembering Dickens and Watkins's (1999, 132) contention that 'the cyclical nature of action research recognizes the need for action plans to be flexible and responsive to the environment,' it was now deemed wise to approach the information gathering in a different way. We would have to continue working towards the shared understanding but would have to be patient in the process.

4.2.2.4 <u>Developing the next action steps</u>

It was decided by the researcher, HSCL Coordinator and advising parents to incorporate a section on parent-school partnership into meetings already scheduled to take place, the purpose of which was to inform parents of Junior Infants of their child's curriculum for the subsequent year, i.e., Senior Infant year. It was possible to include a section on parent-school partnership in

these meetings as the agenda of the meetings was short and, therefore, would not take much time. Letters of invitation were sent to the parents of children in Junior Infants (Appendix II). The parents who came to the meetings (eighteen parents in total) were more than willing to share their views on parent-school partnership and to answer the interview questions. These parents became the first three focus groups. The only difficulty experienced was that, sometimes, as had happened at the piloting sessions, the researcher had difficulty keeping the group focused on the questions. In spite of this, the meetings yielded valuable information, leading to the conclusion that the failure to engage the parents in discussion on partnership up to then was not due to their unwillingness to give their views but was due to a fault in the method of asking them to share these views.

It was still necessary to persevere with attempts to put focus groups in place for the research as, due to time and other constraints, it would not always be possible to incorporate the interview questions into existing meetings. The difficulty of assembling focus groups thus remained but a lesson had been learned from the experience with the first three focus groups, i.e., that parents are more likely to respond to school invitations that are of immediately practical benefit. In the case of the first three focus groups, the perceived practical benefit was the knowledge that would be available to them of their child's curriculum for the next school year.

It was decided to take a more informal approach to arranging the individual interviews. Instead of formally arranging to meet parents, parents of the Junior

Infant and Second classes would be asked by the researcher, when she met them in the course of bringing their children to school or collecting them from school, if they would consent to speaking to her there and then about parent-school partnership.

4.2.2.5 <u>Implementing the next action steps</u>

The informal system of asking parents to answer the interview questions 'on the spot' was more successful than formal, written or oral invitations had been. The researcher took every opportunity to elicit parents' views, contacting them in the mornings and afternoons as they dropped off or collected their children, when they were in the Parents' Room and, in fact, whenever parents gathered in the school and were available. Some parents, if they could not stay for an interview, took a copy of the interview questions and returned written replies.

The researcher was very aware, at this time, of the centrality of the researcher in qualitative research, as identified by McQueen and Knussen (2002, 198) and of Dadds's (1993, 31) reminder that action research places heavy demands on the teacher researcher, who will also 'be working in the interactive cut-and-thrust of demanding classrooms and demanding schools, using their nerve endings to seek for the time and opportunity to put their research theories to practical tests.'

At the end of Mini-Spiral Two, an understanding of parent-school partnership was beginning to emerge from individual parents. This interviewing of

individual parents continued into the next mini-spiral during which the remaining focus group interviews were conducted.

4.2.3 Pre-action research spiral: Mini-Spiral Three

4.2.3.1 <u>Identifying and clarifying the general idea</u>

The general idea still remained the same, i.e., to acquire a shared understanding of parent-school partnership.

4.2.3.2 <u>Reconnaissance</u>

While many individual parents had now given their views, and views had been obtained from three focus groups, it was now necessary to gain parental views on partnership through more focus group interviews.

4.2.3.3 <u>Constructing the general plan</u>

In this second school year of the action research (2005/2006), there was a new cohort of Junior Infants and Second Classes. We already had the views of Junior Infant parents in three focus groups. We needed now to form focus groups from the Second Class parents and to ask the parents of the new Junior Infants if they too would consent to be part of focus groups for the action research.

4.2.3.4 Developing the next action steps

In order to get as broad a range of views as possible, it was decided to continue with individual interviews as well as conducting focus group interviews.

In view of the difficulty experienced by the researcher, in keeping participants focused on the questions, it was now decided to request an experienced facilitator to conduct the focus group interviews. The facilitator had worked many times before with parent groups, on policy formation, in St. Mary's School. The researcher would of course be present at the interviews.

4.2.3.5 Implementing the next action steps

During the second term of the 2005/2006 school year, the focus group interviews took place. Parents from Second Class and Junior Infants were invited to attend by letter (As in Appendix I). Since there was a very poor response to the letters, parents were personally requested to attend by either the HSCL Coordinator or the researcher. (These were parents whom the HSCL Coordinator and researcher met on corridors and in the yard or whom the researcher was able to contact by telephone.) In total, eight focus group interviews took place, with groups ranging from three to eight parents. The presence of the facilitator ensured that participants were kept focussed on the questions.

Individual interviews continued to the end of the 2005/2006 school year and into the next school year. A total of sixty-eight individual parents gave their views.

4.2.4 Pre-action research spiral: Conclusion

The information gathering phase of the research, reported above, proved difficult and, while it yielded much data, the researcher was aware of the limitations of the process. The first limitation is the fact that the interviews, both at focus group and individual level, were mainly conducted with parents who regularly come to the school. The views of those parents who rarely come to the school were, therefore, largely unrepresented. The second limitation is that, because some of the individual interviews were conducted 'on the spot,' the information received was not as rich as would have been the case had the parents agreed to come in at an agreed, and for an agreed, time when issues could have been teased out and explored more.

The next part of the chapter will present the findings.

4.3 Findings from pre-action interviews

Findings from pre-action interviews will now be presented. Findings from individual parents will be presented first, followed, in the case of each question, by findings from focus group interviews.

Sixty-eight individual parents and eight focus groups gave their views. The focus groups ranged in size from three to eight parents and the total number of parents participating in the focus groups was 40. The participating parents had children in Junior Infants or Second Class during the 2004/2005, 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 school years. Between focus groups and individual interviews, the views of 27% of the relevant parent cohort (2004-2007) are represented.

The parents who participated, either individually or in focus groups, included a broad spectrum, ranging from parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage to parents of children at no such risk. It should be borne in mind that St. Mary's Primary School is included in the DES School Support Programme (Department of Education and Science 2005) because a sizeable percentage of the school population is drawn from areas of social and economic disadvantage. Participating parents were representative of the entire spectrum of the relevant school population. It was not possible to ascertain the exact status of each individual taking part in this part of the research; hence it was impossible to say what percentage fulfilled all of the criteria for educational disadvantage.

The findings from each interview question are presented below. Findings from the individual interviews are presented first, followed by findings from the focus groups. The same method of analysis was used for both individual and focus group responses, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser 1992). First, every response was recorded and the material therein was coded. Charmaz (2006, 43) tells us that 'coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data.' Furthermore, 'coding is more than a beginning; it shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis' (Charmaz 2006, 45). In this way, themes were extracted from the responses which were then categorised under broad headings corresponding to the themes, e.g., communication, co-operation, involvement, etc. Where there was a large number of varied

responses under the broad headings, these responses were further broken down into sub-categories, enabling us to get an in-depth view of parental understandings under each question heading. The data pertaining to each question concludes with a table presenting the findings as reflected in the categories and sub-categories, where relevant, in tabular form. It should be borne in mind, with particular reference to reading percentages, that all the findings are based on qualitative data as parental responses resulted from open questions. When presenting the findings, both the actual number of parents and the percentage of parents expressing the view are given.

In the case of each interview question, a discussion and interpretation of the findings is presented.

4.3.1 Question 1: What does partnership between home and school mean?

4.3.1.1 <u>Findings from individual parents</u>

Individual parental understandings of partnership fell under a number of broad headings, of which the most important are: communication, co-operation, parental school involvement and home and school listening to each other with respect. The responses under the first two headings, communication and co-operation, can be sub-divided under a number of further headings. When reading the findings, it should be noted that most of the parents gave more than one understanding of partnership. (This explains why, in most cases, percentages total more than 100%).

Figure 12: Individual parental understandings of parent-school partnership (Broad categories)
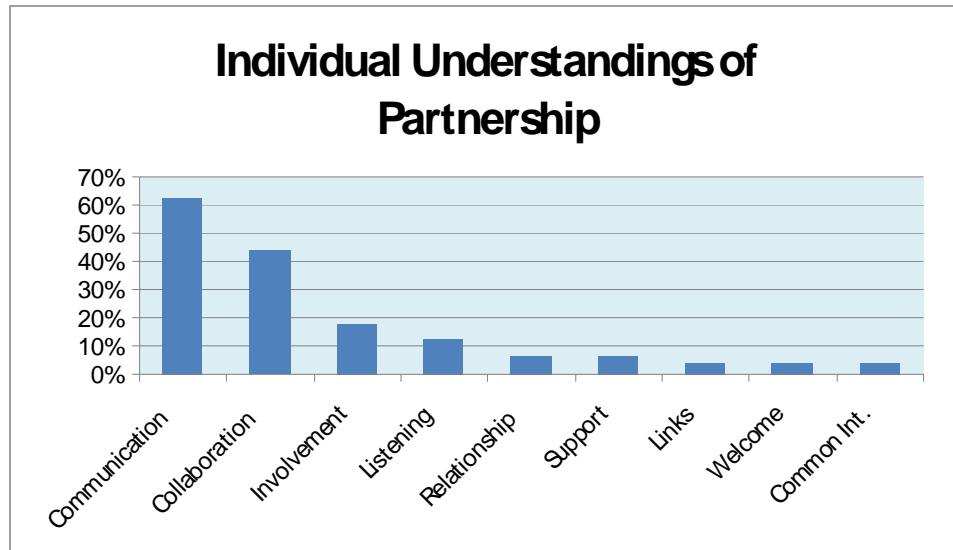
Sixty-three per cent of the parents who gave their views consider parent-school partnership to mean communication between home and school. It means co-operation for 44%, while 18% see partnership as parental involvement in the school. For 13%, partnership means parents and teachers listening to each other with respect. Seven per cent see partnership as a good relationship between teachers and parents or as a support for parents respectively. Four per cent think that partnership means home/school links, a further 4% see it as parents feeling welcome and another 4% think partnership means parents and teachers having a common interest in the child's education. Three per cent consider that being in a Parents' Association is an understanding of partnership and just 1% views it as the school carrying out attendance checks on the pupils and as mutual trust between home and school.

4.3.1.1.1.1   *Partnership as communication*

Figure 13: Partnership as communication
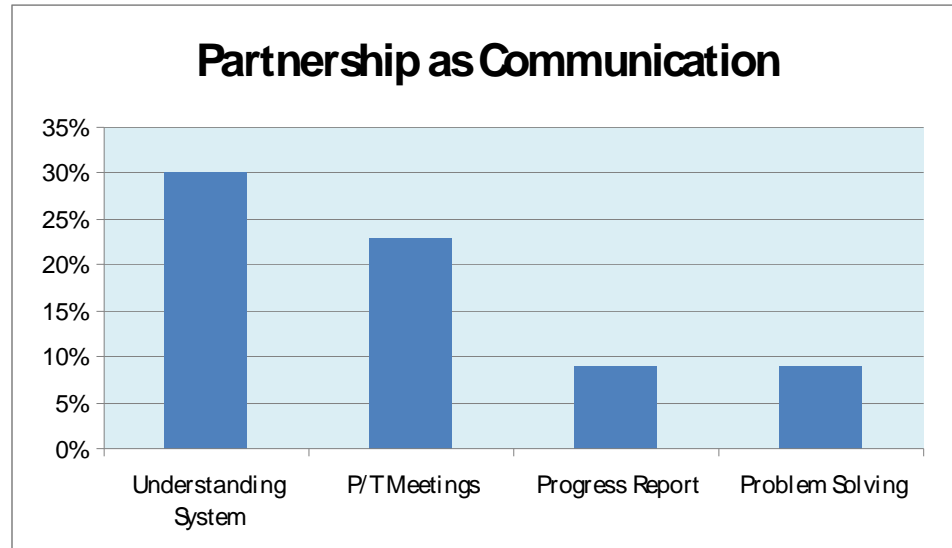
Some of those (71%) who understood partnership to mean communication qualified their understanding of communication in this context. Thirty per-cent of these parents (or 19% of total respondents) indicated that partnership means communication so that they would have a better understanding of the school system. For 23% of these parents (15% of total respondents), partnership means communication through parent-teacher meetings. Nine per cent (6% of total respondents) see partnership as communication of their child's progress. A further 9% (6% of total respondents) see it as communication of problems involving their child.

Comments from parents whose responses are in this sub-category (communication) include:

'School should take more interest in child's background to try and solve problems that may occur in class.'

'To me it means I get to know about my children's education programme.'

'Problems and anxieties can be discussed and hopefully resolved.'

'School and parents meet regularly to progress issues.'

4.3.1.1.1.2   Partnership as co-operation

Figure 14: Partnership as co-operation
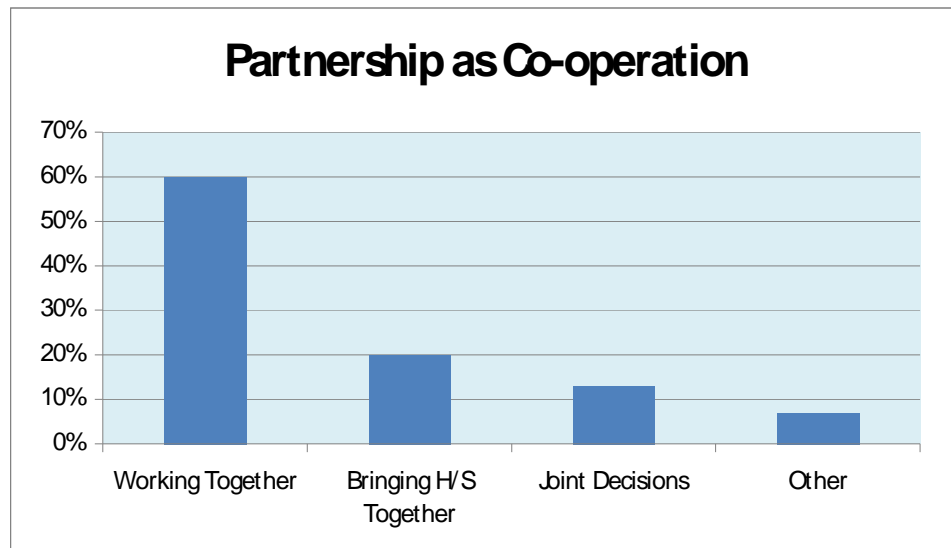
Moving on to those parents who view partnership as co-operation, 60% of these parents (26% of total respondents) see partnership as 'working together.' Twenty per cent (9% of total respondents) of those who view partnership as co-operation consider that partnership means bringing the home and the school together, while 13% (6% of total respondents) view it as joint decision-making. The remaining 7% (4 parents) consider partnership to be 'two-way commitment to help the child,' 'participation between parents and school,' 'home and school intertwining' and 'achieving the same goals'.

In this sub-category of co-operation, some parents commented as follows:

'The more school and parents stick together, the child is happier at work and in themselves and the more educated they become.'

'It means working together to ensure your child's future is secure.'

'[It means] parents and teachers working together to make [the] child's education fun and interesting.'

'Work done in school should continue in the home. You learn in school as well as at home.'

4.3.1.1.1.3   *Partnership as involvement*

Figure 15 : Partnership as involvement
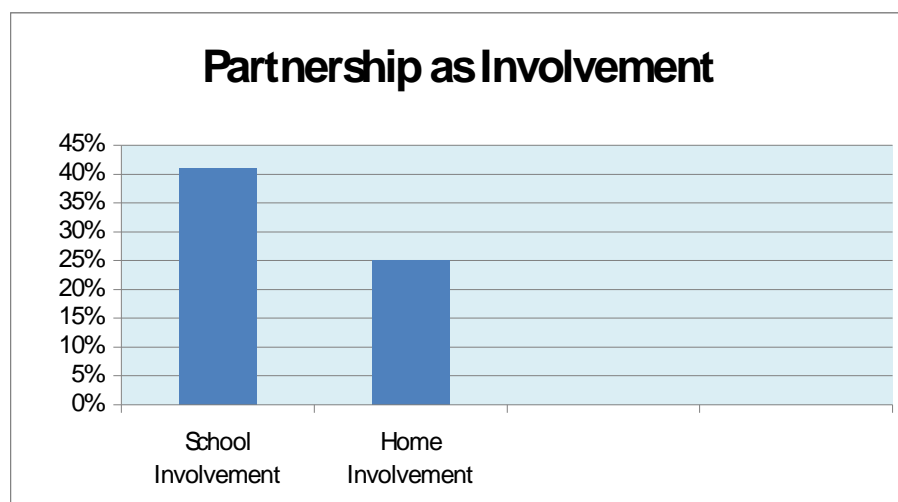
Eighteen per cent of the parents see partnership as involvement. Forty-one per cent of those (7% of total) see involvement as school involvement and 25% (4% of total) see it as home involvement. Some of the parents who interpreted partnership as involvement (18% of total) specified the following types of involvement:

- Involvement with homework

- Participation in school functions

- Volunteering for classroom activities

- Parental involvement in classroom structure

- Parental involvement in 'the direction the school is taking'

4.3.1.1.1.4 *Partnership as listening/respecting views*

Comments from some of the 13% who interpreted partnership as listening/respecting views included:

'Partnership … means the school positively listening and respecting views of parents and vice-versa.'

'If there is a problem and the parent goes to the school, the school will listen.'

'It means teachers including parents.'

'[There should be an] acknowledgement of school management on parents' input.'

'[It means] giving parents a chance to speak.'

4.3.1.1.1.5 *Other understandings of partnership*

Seven per cent view partnership as a support for parents, 'a support system between home and school' or 'families supporting teachers.' A further 7% see it as having a good relationship between home and school or, as one parent put it, 'knowing that the school and the parent relate.' Four per-cent view partnership as home/school links with another 4% stating that partnership means that parents feel welcome in the school. A small percentage of parents offered further understandings, viz., home and school having a common

interest (4%), belonging to the Parents' Association (3%), the school carrying

out attendance checks (1%) and mutual trust (1%).

4.3.1.1.2 <u>*Summary of parental understandings of partnership (Individual*</u>

<u>*parents)*</u>

Table 1: Parental understandings of partnership (Individual)

(Including sub-categories) (Where a sub-category belongs to a broad category,

the broad category is also listed.)

Parental understanding of parent-school partnership	Number of parents who expressed this understanding (N.B. Some parents expressed more than one understanding of term.)	Percentage of parents who expressed this understanding (N.B. Some parents expressed more than one understanding of term.)
Working together (Co-operation)	18	26%
Communication for better understanding of school system (Communication)	13	19%
Involvement of parents in education in the school and at home (Involvement)	12	18%
Communication through parent-teacher meetings (Communication)	10	15%
Listening to each other/mutual respect of views (Communication)	9	13%
Bringing the home and the school together (Co-operation)	6	9%
Relationship between home and school	5	7%
Support between families and schools	5	7%

Communication of child's progress (Communication)	4	6%
Communication of problems involving the child (Communication)	4	6%
Joint decision-making	4	6%
Home/school links	3	4%
Welcome for parents in the school	3	4%
Common parental and school interest in child's education	3	4%
Membership of Parents' Association	2	3%
School carrying out attendance checks	1	1%
Mutual trust	1	1%

Communication was clearly the most common understanding of partnership for most parents (63%), followed by co-operation (44%) and involvement (18%). By breaking down the data under the first two headings, communication and co-operation, and adding the sub-categories thus acquired to the responses under the remaining headings, we get a more detailed picture of understandings of parental partnership as can be seen in Table 1 above.

4.3.1.2 <u>Question 1: Findings from focus group interviews</u>

Table 2: Parental understandings of partnership (Focus Groups)

Parental understandings of parent-school partnership	Number of focus groups that expressed this understanding (Out of a total of eight)
Working together	5
Involvement of parents in education in the school and at home	4
Communication between parents and teachers about the child/sharing ideas	3
Parents and teachers being on the same mind	2

Parents feeling welcome in the school	2
Parents and teachers equal in decision-making/setting goals together	2
Parents and teachers listening to one another	1
Parents and teachers assuming joint responsibility for children's education	1
Parents knowing what is going on in school	1
Parents feeling part of the system	1

As seen in Table 2, above, findings from the focus groups echoed the findings from the individual interviews, with five of the eight groups considering partnership to mean 'working together' and half of the groups viewing partnership as meaning good communication (communicating about child, sharing ideas, knowing what is happening). Other understandings of partnership included 'involving parents and families in children's education,' parents and teachers listening to one another, joint responsibility for the children's education, joint goal-setting and decision-making and parents 'feeling part of the system.'

4.3.1.3 Discussion and interpretation of findings: Question 1

The literature indicates that a difficulty arises in the implementation of partnership with parents because of a lack of a common understanding of partnership (Vincent 1997, Brain and Reed 2003, MacGhiolla Phádraig 2005). The parents of St. Mary's have clearly articulated their views on the meaning of partnership. The definition of partnership chosen by the researcher for the purposes of the study/dissertation was that of Driessen, Smit and Sleegers (2005, 528) who believe that 'educational partnership presupposes mutual respect, shared interests and open communication between parents, teachers and the school.' They define educational partnership as 'the process in which

partners aim to strengthen and support each others' skills in order to produce results which signify an improvement for the children involved' (Driessen et al. 2005, 528). It is interesting to note that the parents in St. Mary's identified every single element of the first part of Driessen et al.'s understanding in their own understanding, viz., mutual respect, shared interests, open communication and mutual support.

The parents involved in this research clearly equate good communication with effective partnership. This communication is important, they feel, for two-way conveyance of information concerning the children and also for enabling parents to know more about the school system. The latter is a very important acknowledgment by the parents of St. Mary's. Vincent and Tomlinson (1997), cast a jaundiced eye on the concept of partnership, viewing it as a control mechanism which 'equates with little more than parents' attendance at school events and their passive receipt of information' (Vincent and Tomlinson 1997, 367). Judging by parental responses, the parents of St. Mary's are not merely passive recipients of information. They view the information they receive as valuable in helping them to get to know about the school system. In Crozier's view (1997, 193) working-class parents are less endowed with cultural capital than middle-class parents, 'particularly with respect to educational knowledge such as in terms of how the education system works.' Crozier (1997) contends that one needs to know what one wants from the education system and one needs to have the skills to get this for one's children. In this sense, the parents of St. Mary's view partnership as a way of enhancing their cultural capital.

An examination of the language used in the parental responses, language which refers to such aspects as working together, getting to know about the education programme, parent-teacher discussion and continuation of work from home to school, reveals no sense of parental passivity. Indeed, the language conveys a sense of agency and a sense of joint parent-teacher endeavour.

The centrality of the child in parent-school partnership is especially evident from the comments of the parents. In this, the parents are at one with Keyes (not dated, 7) who notes that the child is at the heart of the parent-teacher relationship.

The parents' views on involvement (See Section 4.3.1.1.1.3 above, pp. 215-216) can usefully be compared with Epstein's typology. (See Chapter Two, pp. 96-97, for description of Epstein's typology.) Epstein and her colleagues (Connors and Epstein 1995) have identified six types of parental involvement, viz., basic obligations of families (Type1), basic obligations of schools (Type 2), involvement at school (Type 3), involvement in learning activities at home (Type 4), involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy (Type 5) and collaboration and exchanges with community organizations (Type 6). The types of involvement specified by the parents broadly cover the first five types identified by Epstein. Type 6, collaboration and exchanges with community organizations does not feature in parental understandings. Type 5, i.e., involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy, is weakly identified, as can be seen if one examines all of the parental responses. Just 6% of individual parents and two focus groups view joint decision-making as an

understanding of partnership. Membership of the Parents' Association was mentioned by 3% of individual parents and no focus group. There was no reference, in any interview, to parental membership of the Board of Management. Where parents gave responses indicating that partnership means listening/respecting views, there is a sense that the parents view the school as the dominant partner. As an illustration, amongst the views expressed were the view that the school should listen if the parent comes with a problem, that teachers should include parents, that school management should acknowledge parents' input and that parents should be given the chance to speak. Inherent in all of these views is an implicit understanding that the school has, within its remit, the right to bestow or withhold what is suggested. (Compare this to the sense of agency and joint endeavour noted on the previous page. Parents have a sense of joint parent-teacher endeavour but a sense of the teacher being 'in control' emerges from parental replies.) In their analysis of the findings of a study examining powerlessness in professional and parent relationships, Todd and Higgins (1998, 231) argue that the tentativeness of parents in the area of children's learning 'supported the teachers' hegemony' and that 'their behaviour was implicit collusion with the teacher's use of power.' In the present study, teachers' views were not sought. While, in the opinion of the researcher, the teachers in St. Mary's would not consider themselves as 'powerful' in relation to parents, Todd and Higgins's (1998) argument provides food for thought.

4.3.2 Question 2: How important is it to have partnership between parents and school?

4.3.2.1 <u>Findings from individual interviews</u>

Figure 16: Importance of parent-school partnership

Importance of Parent-School Partnership
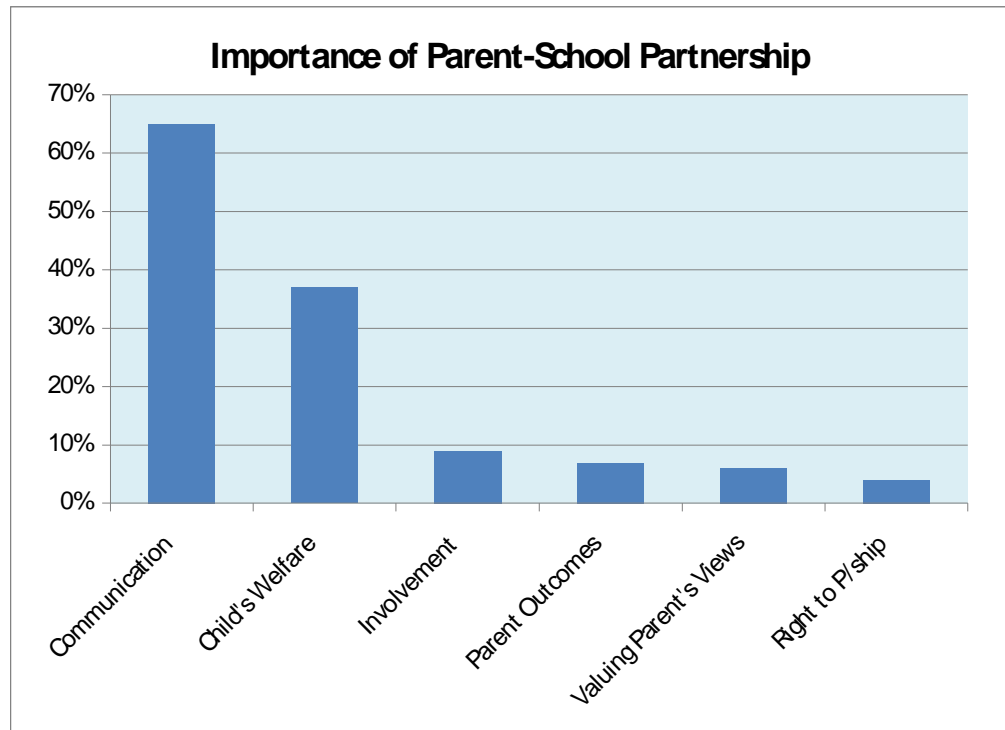
While sixteen of the parents (24%) answered, 'Very important,' to this question, with a further parent stating that it is 'imperative' and another 'essential,' most parents chose to answer by giving reasons for the importance of parent-school partnership. Many parents gave more than one reason. As in the replies to Question 1, there was an overriding emphasis by parents on communication in their replies to this question. Sixty-five per-cent of the parents stated that partnership is important for reasons concerning communication and 37% see partnership as being important for reasons

concerned with their child's welfare. Reasons of lesser importance for having partnership, in the parents' view, were:

- Increased parental involvement (9%)

- Beneficial outcomes for parents (7%)

- Valuing of parents' opinions (6%)

- Right of parents to be involved in partnership (4%)

- Facilitation of relationship between teachers and parents (4%)

- Parents feeling welcome in the school (4%)

- Enablement of school/home blending (3%)

- Facilitation of joint decision-making (2%)

- Sharing of responsibility (1%)

- Making matters easier for parent and child (1%)

- Allowing provision of the best education (1%)

- To get better results (1%)

- Increase of trust (1%)

- Fostering of respect (1%)

- Increasing parents' confidence in school (1%)

4.3.2.1.1   *Sub-categories of response to Question 2*

4.3.2.1.1.1   *Communication*

Figure 17: Partnership as communication
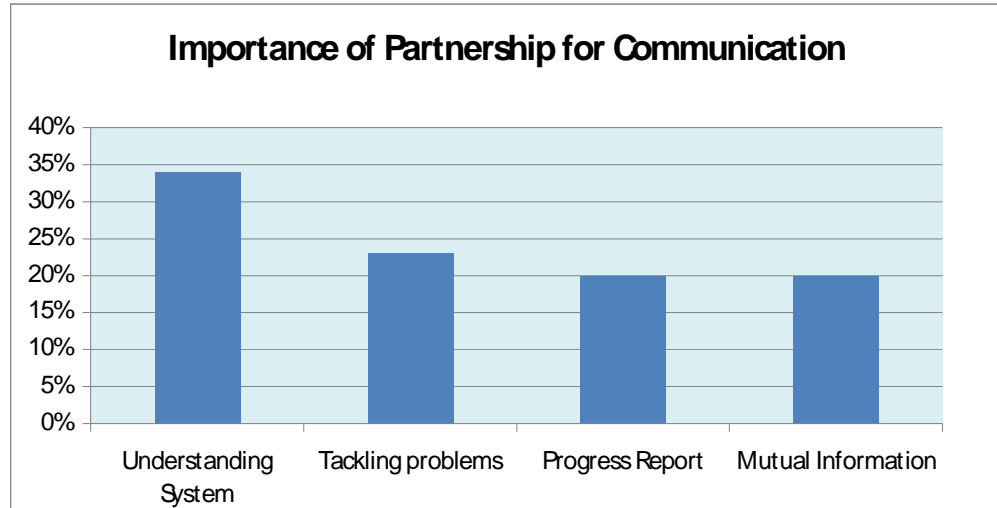
The views of parents who see partnership as important for communication reasons will now be examined. These views can be sub-divided under a number of further headings. Thirty-four per-cent of these parents (22% of total respondents) consider partnership important so that they could learn more about the school system. Some of the knowledge required was concerned with the immediate classroom environment because 'all parents need to know what's going on in the school classroom which your child is in.' Others were conscious of the need to know about school management. One parent stated: 'If you send a child to school without asking why things are done a certain way you will never understand the system of the school.' Another parent looked at wider issues and stated: 'Parents need to know how school is coping with government cutbacks, shortages of teachers, classroom size.' To sum up, 'You know better what's going on if you have partnership.'

Twenty-three per-cent of these parents (15% of total respondents) viewed partnership as a way of tackling problems/concerns they had with their child's schooling. Partnership 'highlights problems' and 'if there is a problem, you know you can talk to them [i.e., the teachers].' One parent felt that 'if there's no partnership and communication, children with problems can slip through the net.'

Partnership is important for communicating the children's progress, in the view of 20% of these parents (13% of total respondents). It is 'very important to let parents know how well children are doing.' One parent stated that she would like 'to be kept informed about my child's progress, communication skills and adaptability.'

A further 20% (13% of total respondents) considered that partnership is a method of mutual understanding/information-giving between parents and teachers. The following comments were made by parents:

'Both parties can learn from each other to highlight ways of improving education.'

'It's very important to have partnership between parents and school so we can recognise our children's faults, strengths and weaknesses.'

'It's important to have communication on both levels [and] awareness of both parties on child's needs.'

'It's great that parents and teachers can communicate so well. Parents need to know what's happening with pupils in school and teacher needs to know what's happening with [the] child at home.'

'[Partnership is important for] finding out where our children need help and how we can help our children.'

'[Partnership is important] so that parents are aware of their child's development [and] teachers are aware of child's family surroundings.'

'[Partnership is important so] parents can see more clearly from the teachers' point of view.'

Finally, in this context, one parent considered that it is 'important to let teachers know they have the support of parents.'

4.3.2.1.1.2   *Welfare of Child*

While some parents simply stated that partnership is important because it is beneficial to the child, others gave reasons why this is so. When considering the responses of these parents under this heading, it is interesting to note that just 8% of the parents who considered partnership important for the child's welfare (3% of total respondents) saw partnership as important for pupil outcomes. For 48% (18% of total respondents) partnership is important for reasons concerning the child's day-to-day experience in school. These include the child's safety (4% of total respondents), security/confidence (3%), and aspects of the child's general well-being at school including comfort, enjoyment, happiness, easier school life, ability to learn, maintenance of interest in school and overall attitude to school (10% of total respondents).

4.3.2.1.2   *Summary of parental understandings of importance of*

partnership (Individual interviews)

Taking the sub-categories under communication and the child's welfare into account, the table below gives a breakdown of the parents' responses to Question Two.

Table 3: Parental understandings of importance of partnership (Individual) (Including sub-categories)

Parental understanding of the importance of parent-school partnership Partnership is important:	Number of parents who expressed this understanding (N.B. Some parents expressed more than one understanding of term.)	Percentage of parents who expressed this understanding (N.B. Some parents expressed more than one understanding of term.)
in order to understand the school system (Communication)	15	22%
in order to ensure the child's day-to-day welfare in the school	12	18%
to help tackle problems concerning the child (Communication)	10	15%
to communicate the child's progress (Communication)	9	13%
for mutual parent/teacher help/understanding (Communication)	9	13%
to increase parental involvement (Involvement)	6	9%
so as to value parents' views/increase respect/trust	5	7%
to provide beneficial outcomes for parents	5	7%
so that parents and teachers can work as a unit (Co-operation)	5	7%

to exercise parents' rights to partnership	3	4%
to improve parent-teacher relationship	3	4%
to make parents feel welcome in the school	3	4%
to increase pupils' educational outcomes	3	4%
to enable home/school blending	2	3%
to facilitate joint decision-making	1	1%
to facilitate sharing of responsibility	1	1%
to make matters easier for parent/child	1	1%
to facilitate provision of the best education	1	1%

4.3.2.2 Question 2: Findings from focus group interviews

Table 4: Parental understandings of importance of partnership (Focus Group)

Parental understanding of the importance of parent-school partnership Partnership is important:	Number of groups that expressed this understanding
so that parents can see how children react to other children in school	4
because children like it when parents are involved in school	3
because parents can give teachers a better understanding of the children	3
because teachers can have the support of parents	2
because children are happier if they think parents are happy with the school	2
because teachers will be more comfortable approaching parents if there is a problem	1
because parents can be shown how to help children with homework	1
to help parents to see how the school is run	1
to facilitate parents to attend classes	1
to ensure that parents are 'on the same level' as teachers	1
because child will be happier if there are two people 'rooting' for him/her	1

because it helps the child if the school has an understanding of him/her from parents	1
because it helps parents see how other children behave	1

As shown in Table 4, the views offered by the focus groups were more narrowly focused on children, parents and teachers than those of the individual parents. Five of the eight groups cited communication as a reason for partnership, with four of these groups feeling partnership would enable parents to see how children react to other children in school and one viewing partnership as helping parents see how other children behave. Five of the groups saw partnership as impacting on the child affectively in that three groups felt that children like it when parents are involved at school and two groups expressed the opinion that children are happier if they feel that relationships between teacher and school are good. Another group felt that the child would be happy to know that there were two people 'rooting' for him/her. Three groups considered that partnership would help the teacher as it would provide support and a recognition by the teacher that he/she could comfortably approach parents if there is a problem. Two groups saw beneficial outcomes for parents as a result of partnership. In the words of one group, 'You would be on the same level as the school if you were in partnership.' Another felt that partnership would facilitate parents to attend classes. Finally, one group stated that partnership would facilitate parents and teachers working together and another felt partnership was important because parents and teachers have joint responsibility for children's education.

4.3.2.3 <u>Discussion and interpretation of findings: Question 2</u>

OECD (1997, 27) has listed reasons why parents become involved in their children's education. These are: improved achievement, parental education, communication, influence, support for the school and support from the school. An examination of the reasons why parents in St. Mary's feel partnership is important shows that many of the reasons fall under the OECD categories, especially if we use the OECD categories as broad headings. St. Mary's parents add parental right to partnership, the happiness of the child and the facilitation of equality between parents and teachers.

According to Maring and Magelky (1990, 606), effective communication is the key to parent/community involvement. Alexander (1996, 19) claims that there is little 'constructive communication' between teachers and parents and that most direct communication between home and school concerns administrative matters. Such functional communication did not feature at all in the understandings of the parents of St. Mary's, who place a high value on communication. Their understanding of communication is a much richer one, centring on communication to acquire knowledge, communication to highlight children's progress and problems and communication for the purpose of exchanging views and information between parents and teachers. All of these forms of communication are vital because, as Katz (1984) reminds us, teachers and parents know children in different contexts, hence the necessity to communicate.

Four of the focus groups highlighted a further reason for partnership, viz., so that parents can see how children react to other children in school. Cullen (2000a, 15) sees value in this activity, as well as in parents interacting with teachers, and believes that parents' social-capital value is diminished when they spend less time interacting with their children's school friends or other associates or when they do not know or interact with their children's teachers.

While 18% of individual parents see partnership as important in order to ensure the child's day-to-day welfare in the school, note that only 4% see it as a pathway to improving educational outcomes, suggesting other priorities are more important for parents. Four focus groups consider that partnership will increase the child's happiness but no reference is made in any group to educational outcomes. A study by Crozier (1997) showed that the ways in which parents supported their children's education differed along class lines, with working class parents relying more than middle class parents on teachers as professionals and viewing education as a division of parent-teacher labour. This may explain why there was little emphasis on educational outcomes in the responses: perhaps parents did not consider that they themselves have a considerable influence on educational outcomes and that they view their role as co-educators, which they identified in Question 1, as supportive rather than proactive.

Three focus groups stated that children like it when parents are involved. This may seem like a less weighty reason for partnership than increased communication or improved outcomes. Yet, how the child feels about parental

involvement is of consequence. Ames et al. (1993, 15) remind us to take note of the child's receptiveness to involvement as 'the subjective view of the child becomes important in understanding the benefits of parent involvement.'

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The responses to Question 2 highlight the findings for Question 1 that show that the parents place little emphasis on Types 5 (involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy) and 6 (collaboration and exchanges with community organisations) of Epstein's typology (Connors and Epstein 1995). Two per cent of individual parents see partnership as important to facilitate joint decision-making and the matter does not receive a mention from any focus group. Community involvement is not mentioned by either individual parents or focus groups.

Driessen et al. (2005, 528) define educational partnership as 'the process in which partners aim to strengthen and support each others' skills in order to produce results which signify an improvement for the children involved.' The parents in St. Mary's clearly see partnership as a process in which partners aim to strengthen and support each other's skills in order to produce results which signify an improvement for the children involved. This improvement, in their view, centres mainly on the children's day-to-day experience in the school and only marginally on educational outcomes.

4.3.3 Question 3: What do you feel about parent-school partnership in general?

4.3.3.1 <u>Findings from individual interviews</u>

There was an almost unanimously positive response from parents regarding parent-school partnership. Fifty per cent offered a favourable comment, e.g., 'I think it is very good as it is very important for the teacher and parent to get along' or 'I feel partnership is essential between parents and school.' Some of these parents and all of the others provided comments regarding their views on parent-school partnership from a general viewpoint. These fell under the following headings:

- Communication (22%)

- Benefit to the child (9%)

- Relationships (9%)

- Involvement (6%)

In addition, individual parents proffered the following comments on partnership:

'It helps those [parents] who find homework with children difficult.'

'It generates a feeling of openness.'

'Without help from parents, school can't go smoothly. Without help of school, [the] child can't grow.'

'At the end of the day, it's up to the parents to ensure and instil a good partnership with teachers and the school. A teacher can only do so much.'

The only negative comment concerned the non-involvement of some parents:

'I think only some parents avail of the system and it's a shame. The same parents time and time again show up for meetings.'

4.3.3.1.1   *Sub-category of responses to Question 3 (Individual parents)*

4.3.3.1.1.1   *Communication*

Communication featured largely again in the responses to this question but, interestingly, from a different angle to that of the two previous questions. In Question 1, 19% of the parents understood partnership to mean communication to them by the school of information regarding the school system. In Question 2, 22% of the parents considered partnership to be important so that they would have a better knowledge of the system. When asked how they felt about partnership in general, in this question, while 22% listed factors concerning communication, only 4% listed factors concerned with getting to know more about the system. This group included one parent who commented: 'Some parents can't read and write. (With HSCL) they can do Irish courses. The more you learn the more you can help your child. They'll get on better.'

The other responses were:

- general responses (7%), e.g., 'There should be regular and continual contact between both parents and teachers.'

- responses concerning the child's progress (4%), e.g., 'I think it is great. For example, parent-teacher meetings let you know what's happening in a major part of our children's lives.'

- responses concerning the communication of problems (4%), e.g., 'I feel it is very important to communicate on a regular basis with the teacher to find out if the child is happy and any problems that may be happening at school and at home.'

- responses concerning mutual understanding/information-giving between parents and teachers (3%), e.g., 'It's an excellent idea so that information is directly given to both parents and teachers.'

4.3.3.1.1.2 Benefit to the child

One parent considered that 'the more partnership there is the better chance there will be for children to succeed.' The other comments centred on the children's feelings:

'I think it makes life easier for the child when they know parents and teachers communicate.'

'The kids are delighted that the parents show up for meetings and are proud.'

'It's so beneficial for the kids to see their parents interested, and encouraging towards the kids.'

4.3.3.1.1.3 Improvement of relationships

The change in parent-teacher relationships in recent times was highlighted by one parent, as follows: 'Years ago, school and teachers to my age group (38) were frightening. Now it's great to be able to speak and feel on friendly terms with teachers.' Another thought partnership is a great idea 'as I feel a lot more comfortable and important with working with the school and my children.' Partnership 'develops a close relationship both inside and outside the school environment' and 'helps you to get to know your child's teacher.' If a good relationship is established 'issues that arise may be dealt with properly and easily.' Finally, in the words of one parent, 'It's an excellent idea as it fosters a sense of community.'

4.3.3.1.1.4   Involvement

One parent summed up the responses in this category when she stated:

> I think it is very good that parents today can help and have a say in their child's education and put their ideas forward. As there are a lot of children in one class and [the children] cannot get individual help when needed parents can help in that way.

4.3.3.1.2   Summary of parental feelings on parent-school partnership in general (Individual interviews)

While communication and involvement were again highlighted, our attention was drawn, in the responses to this question, to the importance of fostering, through partnership, parent-teacher relationships.

Table 5: Parental feelings on parent-school partnership in general (Individual)

Parents' feelings about parent-school partnership in general Parent-school partnership:	Number of parents who expressed this understanding	Percentage of parents who expressed this understanding
results in benefits for the children	6	9%
enhances parent-teacher relationships	6	9%
facilitates general home/school communication (Communication)	5	7%
facilitates parental involvement in school (Involvement)	4	6%
allows parents to understand more about the school system (Communication)	3	4%
facilitates communication of children's progress (Communication)	3	4%

facilitates communication of children's problems (Communication)	3	4%
facilitates mutual understanding between parents and teachers (Communication)	3	3%

4.3.3.2 Question 3: Findings from focus group interviews

Table 6: Parental feelings on parent-school partnership in general (Focus Groups)

Parents' feelings about parent-school partnership in general Parent-school partnership:	Number of groups that expressed this understanding
has improved in recent years	2
enhances parent-teacher relations	2
benefits children	2
is promoted by the HSCL Scheme	1
leads to parent-teacher equality	1
can capitalise on willingness of parents to be involved	1
enhances communication	1

Focus group feelings on parent-school partnership were unanimously positive. Two groups expressed satisfaction concerning the fact that parent-school relations had improved in recent years, that the situation where 'you couldn't approach the teacher' has ended. One group praised the HSCL Scheme and noted its benefits to the school. Two groups felt that partnership enhances parent-teacher relations. One group considered that partnership creates equality between parents and teachers and allows parents to be 'at the same level' as teachers. Two groups saw partnership as resulting in benefits for children. One of these thought that children are more comfortable when parents are involved and that 'the more people that are working for the children, the better.' The other group stated that children love parental involvement and that it is 'a change' for them when parents come into the school. Another group stressed

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the willingness of parents to become involved. Just one group mentioned communication in the context of its feelings on partnership in general, stating that, through partnership, 'you are kept informed all the time.'

4.3.3.3 Discussion and interpretation of findings: Question 3

While the findings from this question reinforced the findings from the two previous questions, particularly on the importance of partnership to foster communication and involvement and to enhance the welfare of the child, there was an increased emphasis in the responses to this question on parent-teacher relationships. This understanding is important because, as Bastiani (1993) reminds us, schools in which pupils do well are all characterized by good home-school relations. The improvement in recent years in parent-teacher relationships was referred to both in individual interviews and focus groups. This improvement enables joint problem-solving and fosters equality and a sense of community.

4.3.4   Question 4:   From your own experience, what do you feel about parent-school partnership?

4.3.4.1 Findings from individual interviews

This question evoked an overwhelmingly positive reply from the individual parents (91%), with just 9% expressing lack of satisfaction and 1% (one parent) who had never experienced partnership. Those who were dissatisfied cited a lack of effort on the school's part to promote partnership, dissatisfaction with the way the school dealt with problems or the fact that parents were only contacted when there was a problem and general lack of communication.

Comments from the satisfied parents included the following:

'I think it is very good and healthy for the school environment.'

'I feel OK. I have no problems. I have always been happy with the partnership.'

'From my experience, parent-school partnership is very good in this school.'

'In my experience, I have never had any problems with this as I feel this school has an open-door policy.'

'It's good and beneficial that the Home/School Links Teacher has a presence in the morning.'

4.3.4.1.1   Sub-categories of reponses to Question 4 (Individual parents)

4.3.4.1.1.1   Communication

While individual parents stated that they felt welcomed and respected as a result of parent-school partnership and that relationships had improved as a result, good communication as a result of partnership received a special mention from 28% of total respondents. Replies from these parents fell mainly under the headings of ease of communication with the class teacher (32%, or 9% of total respondents), good communication of children's progress (26%, or 7% of total respondents) and communication enabling parents to understand the system (21%, or 6% of total respondents).

Replies from parents to this question included the following:

'I have been involved with reading with the First Class pupils last year which was a good experience.'

'I feel it to be extremely beneficial as it gets you involved in a very important part of your child's development.'

'The school is always trying to get the parents involved with the school.'

'I've never had a problem with the school or the teacher and I've done *Maths for Fun* with kids which was fab.'

'I feel I'm able to approach the school easily if I have a problem and find that together we can sort it.'

'It works well for me. I know what my child is doing, is capable of and how it can be improved where necessary.'

'It has given me more of an insight into the everyday running of school and how teachers work with students.'

4.3.4.1.1.2   *Other sub-categories*

Thirteen per cent of parents considered that partnership had resulted in their becoming involved in the school. For 10%, partnership had benefited their child, for 7% it had facilitated the development of good parent-teacher relationships and for 4% it had enabled co-operation. One parent felt that she felt welcome in the school as a result of partnership, another felt respected and yet another felt that partnership had made learning fun for parents and children.

4.3.4.1.2   *Summary of parental feelings on parent-school partnership, from parents' own experience (Individual interviews)*

The table below shows a breakdown of parental replies on how parents feel, from their own experience, about parent-school partnership. (Note that some

parents simply stated that they had or had not had a favourable experience of

partnership. Only some elaborated.)

Table 7: Feelings on partnership from parents' own experience (Individual)

(Including sub-categories)

Parents' views of their own experience of parent-school partnership	Number of parents who expressed this view	Percentage of parents who expressed this view
Through partnership, parents have become involved in school activities.	9	13%
Partnership has benefited their children.	7	10%
Through partnership, parents were able to communicate easily with class teachers.	6	9%
Through partnership, parents were able to learn about their children's progress.	5	7%
Through partnership, good parent-teacher relationships developed.	5	7%
Through partnership, parents were able to learn about the school system.	4	6%
Partnership is lacking because there is not enough communication.	4	6%
Partnership has enabled co-operation between parents and teachers.	3	4%
Parents feel welcome as a result of partnership.	1	1%
Parents feel respected as a result of partnership.	1	1%
Partnership has made learning fun for parents and children.	1	1%
Parent could not be involved in partnership because of work commitments.	1	1%
Parent was contacted by school only when a problem arose.	1	1%
School does not encourage enough partnership.	1	1%

4.3.4.2 <u>Question 4: Findings from focus group interviews</u>

Table 8: Feelings on partnership from parents' own experience (Focus Groups)

Parents' views of their own experience of parent-school partnership	Number of groups that expressed this understanding
There are problems with communication.	3
Communication is good.	2
There are personal benefits for parents accruing from partnership.	2
Parents are always listened to in school.	2
Children like it when parents are involved.	2
Parents are consulted enough.	1
Joint goal-setting does not take place.	1

Five of the eight focus groups mentioned communication in the context of their feelings, from their own experience, on parent-school partnership. Three of these groups highlighted problems concerning communication. One group considered that they only knew what was happening in school through communication with their children and another that there should be more parent-teacher meetings. A third group expressed the view that, when parents are told that a child could 'do better,' parents often do not know how to help a child to improve. Two groups considered that parent-teacher communication is good and that parents learn a lot from their child's homework journal. One group saw the classroom environment as providing much information/knowledge for parents. For two groups, there were personal benefits from partnership. One of these groups saw benefits from meeting with other parents. The other group considered that, through partnership, 'you come out of school relaxed and happy that your child is not upset.' Two further

groups felt that they were always listened to in the school. One group stated that parents are always consulted, though another group felt that parents and teachers do not set goals together. Two groups considered that their children liked the fact that the parents were involved in the school, but one of these groups stated that younger children like it more than older children.

4.3.4.3 <u>Discussion and interpretation of findings: Question 4</u>

Despite the significantly positive response to this question, the findings indicate a clear gap between parental theories on parent-school partnership and actual practice.

The findings from this question show that parents view communication not just as an element of partnership but also as an outcome. While 28% listed improved communication as a result of partnership, 6% voiced a concern that partnership was lacking because there was not enough communication. This indicates that the communication processes in place in the school do not adequately serve all parents. A further issue arises here in that a mere 6% said that partnership had enabled them to learn about the school system whereas 22% of the same parents indicated, in response to Question 2, that partnership is important in order to understand the school system.

Moving on to co-operation, we saw that, in reply to Question 1, 26% of parents viewed partnership as parents and teachers working together. In the findings to Question 4, only 4% stated that partnership had resulted in increased co-operation between themselves and the teachers.

While 18% of parents indicated that they saw partnership as involvement, in their replies to Question 1, just 13% listed involvement as an outcome of partnership for themselves. A further cause for reflection arises from the fact that only 10% noted benefits for their children as a result of partnership while, in response to Question 2, 18% stated that partnership is important to ensure the child's day-to-day welfare in the school with a further 4% seeing partnership as important to increase pupils' educational outcomes. The evidence provided from the findings to Question 3 seems to point to the fact that a majority of parents do not see themselves as being involved and, hence, do not see concomitant outcomes for their children.

While all of the issues identified in this paragraph must be taken seriously, the paragraph should be read with qualification. First, the responses were the result of an open question and the findings reflect the exact responses. The results might be different if *all* of the parents had been asked direct questions, e.g., "Have you learned more about the school system as a result of communication?", "Has partnership increased your involvement?", etc. Second, when they referred to involvement, they may have been referring to school involvement only and not to the whole spectrum of parental involvement in education.

The above qualifications notwithstanding, the findings present a challenge for the school and the project. As regards the reported low level of involvement, we should remember Epstein's (1995, 217) finding that 'teachers' practices to

involve families are as or more important than family background variables such as race or ethnicity, social class, marital status, or mother's work status for determining whether and how parents become involved in their children's education.' This is not to assume that putting involvement in place is unproblematic. A study by McKibbin et al. (1998) found that most parents wanted to be involved but were not and that, even when they got the opportunity, most did not respond.

4.3.5 Question 5: In general, what are the issues relating to parent-school partnership?

4.3.5.1 <u>Findings from individual interviews</u>

The greatest issue relating to parent-school partnership, in the view of the parents, is work commitments, with 43% citing this as a possible barrier. This was followed by childcare issues (34%) and lack of time (15%). Twelve per cent considered that poor communication between parents and teachers could be an issue and 10% were of the opinion that unapproachable teachers could hinder partnership. Other issues cited included personal issues, parental attitude and lack of parental interest and confidence.

Table 9: General issues relating to partnership (Individual)

Issue	Number of parents expressing this view	Percentage of parents expressing this view
Work commitments	29	43%
Childcare	23	34%
Lack of time	10	15%
Unapproachable teachers	7	10%
Poor parent-teacher communication	8	12%
Personal issues	5	7%
Parental attitudes	4	6%
Home factors	3	4%
No issues perceived	3	4%
Lack of parental interest	2	3%
Lack of parental confidence	1	1%
Timing of involvement activities	1	1%
Exclusion of parents from decision-making	1	1%
Awkward parents	1	1%
Lack of parking	1	1%

4.3.5.2 Question 5: Findings from focus group interviews

Table 10: General issues relating to partnership (Focus Groups)

Issue	Number of groups that expressed this view
Work commitments	8
Childcare	8
Time issues	8
Large families	4
Parent only concerned with own child	1
Parent nervous of involvement	1
Parent's dislike of being approached by teacher	1
Parent feeling guilty because of inability to be involved	1
Parent's lack of knowledge of how to help child	1
Vagueness about homework requirements	1
Unapproachable teachers	1
Lack of mutual parent/teacher trust	1
Not enough parent/teacher meetings	1

All groups considered parents' work commitments, childcare and time available to parents to be issues relating to parent-school partnership. Four groups considered large families to be an issue. For four groups there could be issues to do with the individual parent, viz., nervousness, a dislike of being approached by teachers, a feeling of guilt at not being able to be involved or a lack of knowledge as to how to help their children, especially the older children. One group thought a problem may arise because of the fact that parents are often only concerned with their own children, while teachers must be concerned with all children, A further group considered that there could be a vagueness around older primary children's homework, that it is easier to supervise homework for the younger children as homework requirements are sent home on a sheet weekly. One group felt that there could be issues of trust

or issues arising when the teacher is not approachable. Finally, one group expressed the opinion that there were not enough parent/teacher meetings.

4.3.5.3 Discussion and interpretation of findings: Question 5

Respondents in both individual interviews and focus groups identified work commitments, time and childcare as issues relating to parent-school partnership. These issues have also been identified in the literature (e.g., Crozier 1999, Davies 1990, Dolan and Haxby 1995). The question is, are these issues that the school can do something about, or are they completely beyond the control of the school? Brain and Reed (2003) wonder whether training all parents to take more interest would make a difference, if economic circumstances or home background were not changed. Haynes and Ben-Avie (1996) take a different stance, arguing that when parents have 'meaningful roles pertinent to the functioning of the school,' then 'even work commitments are not seen as obstacles but rather as logistical problems in need of solving.' This argument puts the onus firmly on the school to examine its involvement strategies to ensure that parental roles are meaningful.

Both individual and focus group interviewees expressed a view that teacher attitudes can be an issue. Mittler (2000, 151) contends that 'many parents are apprehensive and anxious about going to schools because they are still carrying the history of their own experiences of teachers and schooling.' Parents may therefore attribute attitudes to teachers based on their own school experiences. That is not to say that unapproachable teachers do not exist. Crozier (1999a, 327) argues that 'parents' perception of teachers as superior and distant is

reinforced by teachers' own stance' and that 'this does little to encourage parents into a more proactive partnership.' The lack of professional training for teachers to help them develop partnerships with parents has been noted in Chapter Two and, as Hornby (2002) reminds us, teachers need access to ongoing professional development activities to help them develop these partnerships.

Twelve per cent of individual parents have noted poor parent-teacher communication as an issue. This lack of communication could result from parents feeling teachers are unapproachable, or, indeed, vice-versa. (Note that 'awkward parents' were cited as a possible issue.) It could also result from some of the other factors identified by the parents as issues, e.g., parental attitudes, lack of parental interest or not enough parent-teacher meetings. The issue of few parent-teacher meetings is outside of the control of the school as the frequency of meetings is a DES matter, as has been noted in Chapter Two (p. 165). As regards opportunities to meet and communicate with parents outside of formal meetings, there are time constraints on teachers, as has also been noted in Chapter Two (p. 165).

4.3.6   Question 6: From your experience, what are the issues relating to parent-school partnership?

4.3.6.1 <u>Findings from individual interviews</u>

4.3.6.1.1   <u>Sub-categories of responses to Question 6</u>

4.3.6.1.1.1   No issues

For 21% of parents, there were no issues relating to parent-school partnership, from their own experience.

Some parents commented as follows:

'Personally, I don't find it hard. I try to get involved as much as possible and join in class work when I can. I love working with the kids.'

'I never had an experience where I could not come to speak to the teacher or someone about something in school. I try to get involved as much as I can. I actually enjoy it.'

'I don't find it hard to come to school at any time unless it is for personal reasons. I try to get involved as much as I can. I love it.'

'I don't think making home/school partnership work is hard, especially if you find the teachers approachable.'

'It's very rewarding for both yourself and your children.'

'As I'm not working at the moment and don't have any younger children I currently don't have a problem.'

4.3.6.1.1.2   Work issues

For 34% of parents, work commitments was a difficulty for them. Working full-time, both parents working and shift work were among the difficulties encountered. One parent commented, 'As I am a full-time working parent, at

times it can be difficult to be in contact with the school regularly and to attend things that the school may need support on.'

4.3.6.1.1.3   Childminding issues

Difficulty with childminding proved the next biggest obstacle, with 31% citing this as a difficulty. One mother stated: 'We have our own business and a baby. I would love to give more than I do, for example to *Bridging the Gap,* but I am unable to due to these reasons.' Another said, 'It is hard when I don't have a family nearby to mind my children.'

4.3.6.1.1.4   Time issues

For 7%, there were time difficulties. As one parent put it, 'For me, it's time constraints as we both work full time but we do make an effort to get involved.'

4.3.6.1.1.5   Further issues

A further 7% thought that teachers could hinder partnership. Teachers who are too strict, teachers unwilling to listen to children's problems and teachers and parents who may be unwilling to participate in partnerships were viewed as potential issues. Lack of communication between home and school was seen as an obstacle to partnership by another 7%. Other issues cited by parents were home factors, e.g., marriage break-up (5%), lack of knowledge about how to help the child (2%), lack of trust (2%) and lack of parental confidence (2%).

4.3.6.1.2   *Summary of parental understandings of issues relating to parent-school partnership, from their own experience (Individual interviews)*

One fifth of the parents had no issue with partnership, from their own experience. Work commitments proved to be the most significant issue for the parents, followed by childminding.

Table 11: Partnership issues from parents' own experience (Individual)

Issue/No issue	Number of parents expressing this view	Percentage of parents expressing this view
Work commitments	23	34%
No issue	14	21%
Childminding	21	31%
Time available	5	7%
Teacher factors	5	7%
Home factors	3	5%
Lack of parental knowledge on how to help with child's education	1	2%
Lack of trust between parents and teachers	1	2%
Lack of parental confidence	1	2%

4.3.6.2 Question 6: Findings from focus group interviews

Table 12: Partnership issues from parents' own experience (Focus Groups)

Issue	Number of groups that expressed this view
Work commitments	3
Childcare	3
Parent/Teacher meetings too early	1
Parent/Teacher meetings too infrequent	1
Parent/teacher meetings adequate	1

Three groups cited work commitments as personal issues hindering partnership and a further three childminding commitments. (See Table 12, above.) The only other issue that arose in response to this question was a concern, articulated by two groups, regarding parent-teacher meetings. One group felt that the annual parent-teacher meeting in November is too early in the school year. A second group considered that two or three meetings a year, instead of one, would be better. Expressing an opposing view, a third group believed that one parent-teacher meeting a year is enough as 'too many meetings can cause anxiety for the child, they may think there's a problem.'

4.3.6.3 Discussion and interpretation of findings: Question 6

Issues concerning work, time and childcare commitments were commented upon in the analysis of Question 5 findings. Judging by focus group responses to Question 6, a consensus on timing/frequency of parent-teacher meetings could be difficult to achieve. The issue of childcare can be a factor militating against school involvement for many parents. A study by Dolan and Haxby (1995) on factors affecting dropout and participation in parent intervention

programmes found that schools with the highest parental attendance had most of their families within walking distance and had options for child care. Home factors were mentioned as an issue by some individual parents in the present study. These factors could be concerned with time or childcare but could equally be related to difficulties in the home, e.g., poverty, ill-health or marital breakdown. For one parent, a lack of parental knowledge on how to help the child was an issue and, for another, a lack of parental confidence. Finders and Lewis (1994) remind us that some parents feel disenfranchised from school settings and claim that most schools send home school work with little information on how to complete it. They further contend that fear is a recurring theme for some parents – fear of appearing foolish or being misunderstood.

4.4 Implications of findings for research project

The understandings provided in this part of the research were used as a foundation for the action research project. Parents and school staff were able to use the understandings both as a guide for action and as a source of data when evaluating that action.

At the base of the project, and supporting it, was the solid sense parents have of themselves as co-educators as well as the positive attitude they display towards parent-school partnership. The centrality of the child in their understanding of partnership provided an excellent starting point. As Heywood-Everett (1999, 169) reminds us:

> For partnership to come into being, teachers and parents must find a common agenda which begins with the child and the children of a school, identify their own group's common educational values and then set out their agreed process aims to meet them.

CHAPTER FIVE: MAIN ACTION SPIRALS

5.1   Introduction

In this chapter the two main action spirals will be described. The first action spiral was implemented with parents of Junior Infants, i.e., children in their first year at primary school, aged approximately 4-5 years. The second action spiral involved parents of children in Second Class, in their fourth year at primary school, aged approximately 7-8 years. Evaluation of the actions in each spiral will be presented and changes that took place as a result of each action will be documented. At the end of the chapter, findings from post-action interviews carried out with the parents participating in both spirals will be presented and compared with findings from the pre-action phase, i.e., with the findings that comprised the shared understanding at pre-action stage. Differences in parental understandings and experience of partnership following the action will be noted.

5.2   First action spiral: Action research with parents of Junior Infant children

The first action spiral consisted of three mini-spirals, each one building on and using the experience and learning gleaned from the previous one. Each succeeding mini-spiral has a component not contained in the previous one. The first mini-spiral consisted of two classroom activities for the same children in their Junior Infant and Senior Infant years, i.e., their first and second years at

school, planned and implemented by a group of six parents, in co-operation with the children's class teachers, the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher. A consciousness of the Revised Curriculum emerged in the second mini-spiral, in which the same parents, in consultation with the teachers, planned an inter-curricular activity for the same children, in their Senior Infant year. In the third mini-spiral, the same parents extended their plan for the inter-curricular activity to include all classes in the school. This whole-school activity was written into the curriculum planning section of the school plan.

According to the School Development Planning Support Service (hereinafter SDPS), 'the school plan deals to a significant degree with the setting of targets and specification of achievement objectives' (SDPS Primary 2005, 12). The SDPS suggests that a school plan should contain general school details, school vision and aims, organizational policies, curriculum plans, procedures and practices and a development section (SDPS Primary 2005, 14-15). (See Appendix IV for information on school planning.) A national progress report on the School Development Planning Initiative (Department of Education and Science 2003a, 29) indicated that 90% of parental involvement in school planning was to be found in organizational (as opposed to curricular) planning. Prior to the present action research, parents in St. Mary's had been involved in formulating organizational policies, e.g., Code of Discipline, Anti-Bullying Policy, Substance Misuse Policy, etc., but had not been involved in curricular planning. The involvement by parents in curricular planning during the action research therefore represents a significant development in parental participation in school planning in St. Mary's.

5.2.1 First action spiral: Mini-Spiral One

This mini-spiral consisted of two classroom activities for the same children in their Junior Infant and Senior Infant years, planned and implemented by a group of six parents, in which fun was the most important element.

5.2.1.1 <u>Identifying and clarifying the general idea</u>

We had, in the 2006/2007 school year, a common understanding of parent-school partnership acquired through the pre-action spiral and 100% agreement from the parents who had given their views in that spiral that this partnership is an essential component of children's education. We also had a new HSCL Coordinator who, as in the case of her predecessor, was happy to participate in the action research project, the aim of which was to increase parent-school partnership.

5.2.1.2 <u>Reconnaissance</u>

'The aims of any action research project or program are to bring about practical improvement, innovation, change or development of social practice, and the practitioners' better understanding of their practices' (Zuber-Skerritt 1996, 83). In considering ways to achieve these aims, it was now essential to link the researcher and research participants 'into a single community of interested colleagues' (Winter 1996, 14). Since this action was going to fit into a continuum of parent-school partnership practices in the school, it is important to note that a community of interested colleagues was already in place through the HSCL Scheme. What was now needed was the formation of groups of parents who would work specifically on this action project to improve parent-

school partnership, to add to the existing situation, to contribute to an increased understanding of how partnership takes place and to answer the research question, 'How can parent-school partnership be improved in an urban primary school?'.

The following were lined up in table form, as shown in Table 13 below: parental involvement types identified by Epstein (Column 1), legal requirements with regard to parents under the Education Act, 1998 (Column 2), key issues arising from the focus group interview findings presented in Chapter Four (Column 3), key issues arising from individual parent interview findings presented in Chapter Four (Column 4), key issues arising from the case studies of parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage, presented in Chapter Six (Column 5) and the position in the school with regard to parent-school partnership as determined by policies, documents and statistical data in place in school (Column 6).

Arising from this information, the researcher identified areas where there were gaps between theory and practice. These areas, outlined in Table 14 below, were presented for consideration to the parents for possible use by them in the development of an action plan.

Table 13: Pre-Action Key Issues Chart

Epstein's Typology	Education Act, 1998 Require-ments	Key issues emerging from Focus Groups	Key issues emerging from individual parent interviews	Key issues emerging from case studies	Pre-action position in school with regard to parent-school partnership as determined by policies, documents and statistical data in place in school
Type 1: Basic obligations of families	The Education Act is concerned with education provided in the school, not with education provided in the home.	Issues focused on school, not home	Issues focused on school, not home	Parents saw it as their responsibility to provide children with all they needed for school and to get them to school.	School supports parents in their efforts to provide home environment supportive of learning. Much support provided by HSCL Coordinator. DES school book grant received by school for needy families.
Type 2: Basic obligations of schools	Promotion by school of effective liaison with parents (Article 6g)	Liaison not specifically mentioned as understanding of partnership but inherent in understandings

Work of the HSCL Coordinator acknowledged | Liaison not specifically mentioned as understanding of partnership but inherent in understandings

Work of the HSCL Coordinator acknowledged | Liaison not specifically mentioned as understanding of partnership but inherent in understandings

Work of the HSCL Coordinator acknowledged | Formal and informal structures in the school for fostering liaison, i.e., Parents' Association, parent-teacher meetings, opportunities to meet informally. HSCL Coordinator plays a vital role. |

Type 2: Basic obligations of schools	Use by school of its available resources to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents (Article 9d)	Not mentioned by parents	Not mentioned by parents	Not mentioned by parents	Moral, spiritual, social and personal development and health education provided through ethos and climate of the school, the curriculum, and through extra-curricular activities. Parents consulted through the formal structures, i.e., Board of Management Parents' Association and policy-making groups
Type 2: Basic obligations of schools	Provision of records of students' progress (Article 9g)

Provision of results of evaluation (Article 22: 2b) | Three focus groups considered communi-cation between parents and teachers to be an understand-ing of partnership but did not specifically mention the passing on of information regarding children's progress. | Six per cent of individual parents considered partnership important to communicate children's progress. | School reports can cause frustration as they are sent out during the summer holidays when teachers are not available for consultation. Parent-teacher meetings are considered to be too short, too infrequent and too early in the school year. | Records relating to the children's progress and the results of evaluation are provided for parents. Reporting of progress takes place mainly through end-of-year school reports and parent-teacher meetings. |

Type 2: Basic obligations of schools	Communic-ation to parents of school policy (Article15:2d) and plan (Article 21:4) and of matters relating to the operation and performance of the school with particular reference to the achievement of objectives as set out in school plan (Article 20).	Three of the eight focus groups considered partnership to mean parent-teacher communi-cation. No focus group mentioned communi-cation of school policy or plan or communi-cation about the achievement of objectives as set out in the school plan.	Sixty-three per cent of individual parents considered partnership to mean communic-ation between home and school. No individual parent mentioned communi-cation of school policy or plan or communi-cation about the achieve-ment of objectives as set out in the school plan.	All of the case study parents felt that communication between them and the school was very good. A problem was identified, however, with written communication Notes brought home by children get lost or the information therein may not adequately convey the intended message. No case study parent mentioned communication of school policy or plan or communication about the achievement of objectives as set out in the school plan.	Formal procedures in place for commun-ication to parents of school policy and for informing parents of matters relating to the operation and performance of the school and to the achievement of objectives as set out in the school plan. These formal procedures operate through the Board of Management and the Parents' Association.
Type 2: Basic obligations of schools	Account-ability by schools to parents regarding efficient use of resources Article15:2f) Availability of accounts for inspection by parents (Article 18:2)	Accountability by the school to parents was not mentioned by any focus group.	Accountability by the school to parents was not mentioned by any individual parent.	Accountability by the school to parents was not mentioned by any case study parent.	A monthly report on the use of resources is made by the Treasurer of the Board of Management to the Board, which includes two parent represent-atives. Resources are subject to both local auditing procedures and DES audits.

Type 2: Basic obligations of schools	Responsibility of schools, with boards and parents, for the creation of a school environment which is supportive of learning (Article 23:2c)	Creating school environment supportive of learning was not mentioned by any focus group.	Creating school environment supportive of learning was not mentioned by any individual parent.	Creating school environment supportive of learning was not mentioned by any case study parent.	The creation of a school environment supportive of learning is part of the school's ethos.
Type 3: Parental involve-ment at school	Encourage-ment by principal of the involvement of parents in the education of the students and in the achievement of the objectives of the school (Article 23: 2e)	Half of the focus groups identified involvement as an understanding of partnership. Findings from one focus group indicated that joint goal-setting does not take place. The involvement of parents in the achievement of the objectives of the school was not mentioned by any focus group.	Eighteen per cent of individual parents identified involvement of parents in education at school and at home as an understanding of partnership. Thirteen per cent stated that they had become more involved as a result of partnership. No parent mentioned that he/she was involved in the achievement of the objectives of the school.	Involvement is difficult/ impossible for some of the case study parents.	Teachers work with parents to involve them in learning activities at home through homework journals, through the provision of courses for parents by HSCL to help them help children with their homework and through the delivery of Junior Infant packs to parents at pre-entry. School involvement activities in place include Paired Reading, *Maths for Fun*, the *Bridging the Gap* Literacy Project and parental involvement in school outings.

Type 4: Parental involve-ment in learning activities at home	Not mentioned in Education Act, 1998	Homework is seen as important by focus groups.	Homework is seen as important by individual parents.	Difficulties are experienced in helping children with homework either through lack of knowledge of parent or some extraneous inhibiting factor.	Courses are provided by the school to help parents help children with homework. Advice and help is also given by the HSCL Coordinator when she visits homes.
Type 5: Involve-ment in advocacy, decision-making and governance	Promotion by school of effective consultation with parents (Article 6,g)	Consultat-ion was not mentioned by focus groups either as an understanding or outcome of partnership nor did it feature in any group's experience of partnership.	Consultation was not mentioned by individual parents either as an understanding or outcome of partnership nor did it feature in any individual's experience of partnership.	Case study parents felt that they were consulted very well by the school. Just one parent felt poorly consulted with regard to her own child and blamed this on the very limited time available to teachers to consult with parents. Parents raised issues regarding communication co-operation and involvement but did not state that they should have been consulted by the school on these issues	Consultation with parents takes place through the formal structures of the Board of Management and the Parents' Association. Parents have been involved in policy-making.
Type 5: Involve-ment in advocacy, decision-making and governance	Inclusion in school plan of directions relating to consultation with parents (Article 21,3)	Consultation with regard to the school plan was not mentioned by any focus group.	Consultation with regard to the school plan was not mentioned by any individual parent	Joint planning was not mentioned by case study parents.	School Plan in place and regularly reviewed and updated. Parents, Board, staff and students have all been involved in formulating the School Plan but not all were involved in

					formulating all components of the plan. Parents have not been involved in formulating any of the curricular plans. Procedures are in place for the circulation of the School Plan.
Type 5: Involve-ment in advocacy, decision-making and governance	Consultation by Principal with parents to set objectives for the school and monitor the achievement of those objectives (Article 23,2d)	Two focus groups understood partnership to mean joint parent-teacher goal-setting. One focus group stated that joint goal-setting does not take place.	The collaborative setting of objectives and the monitoring of those objectives was not mentioned by individual parents.	The collaborative setting of objectives and the monitoring of those objectives was not mentioned by case study parents.	The setting of objectives and the monitoring of the achievement of those objectives are components of policy-making. Parents have been involved in the formulation of all organizational policies in the school.
Type 5: Involve-ment in advocacy, decision-making and governance	Appointment of Boards of Management (Article 14,1) (At primary level, two of the eight Board members are parent represent-tatives.)	No focus group mentioned membership of the Board of Management as an understanding of partnership. Two of the eight focus groups considered partnership to mean that parents and teachers are equal in decision-making.	Six per cent of parents considered that partnership means joint decision-making. No parent included membership of the Board of Management as part of their own experience of partnership.	No case study parent mentioned the Board of Management.	There are two parent represent-atives on the Board of Management.

Type 5: Involvement in advocacy, decision-making and governance	Establishment by parents of parents' association (Article 26,1) and adoption by parents' association of a programme of activities which will promote involvement of parents (Article 26, 2b)	No focus group mentioned membership of the Parents' Association as an understanding of partnership.	Three per cent of parents considered that partnership means membership of the Parents' Association.	The Parents' Association did not feature in the replies of the case study parents.	Well-established Parents' Association in existence. Attendance at annual AGM very low. All parents in the school are invited to monthly meetings. Rare for the meetings to be attended by parents other than the core group.
Type 6: Collabor-ation with the broader community	Education system to be conducted in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff, the community served by the school and the state (Long Title)	Parental understandings of partnership did not include collaboration with the broader community.	Parental understandings of partnership did not include collaboration with the broader community.	Parents felt poorly supported by the broader community.	Collaboration takes place between the school and voluntary and statutory organisations, e.g., Health Service Executive, National Educational Psychological Service, Gardaí, Drugs Task Force, School Completion Programme, Education Welfare Board, Cork City Partnership, University College Cork, Cork Institute of Technology.

In Table 14 (next page), the issues identified in Table 13 are linked with areas on which action may be decided. These areas were presented to the parents for consideration when deciding on action.

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Table 14: Needs Identification Chart

Area	Information available at pre-action stage	Areas for consideration by parent groups when deciding on action
Partnership	The mission and ethos statements of the school clearly identify parents as partners. Partnership practices are in place in the school, coordinated by the HSCL Coordinator. A shared understanding of the meaning of parent-school partnership is in place.	Development of up-to-date parent-school partnership policy
Liaison	Formal and informal structures exist to promote liaison.	Increase in number of liaison structures
Involvement	While 18% of individual parents felt that involvement was one of the meanings of partnership, only 13% said partnership had resulted in increased involvement for them. Parents generally did not see themselves as being involved in setting joint goals for the school. Parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage expressed difficulty in being involved.	Parental input in the devising and advertising of involvement activities Increase in number of involvement opportunities Acquisition of understanding of difficulties experienced by parents of children at risk of educational disadvantage in being involved
Consultation	While formal consultative structures are in place, individual parents and parents in the focus groups did not identify consultation as either a meaning or outcome of partnership, nor did they state that being consulted was amongst their experiences of partnership. Parents of children at risk of educational disadvantage felt, on the whole, well consulted but identified issues in the areas of parent-school co-operation and communication and parental involvement on which they had not been consulted.	Identification of one or two areas in which parents would be consulted, as a starting point

Communication	Communication featured strongly in parental understandings of partnership. There were, however, weaknesses identified in the area of communication. The percentage of parents who considered that they had experienced improved communication as a result of partnership (28%) was less than the percentage that considered communication as a meaning of partnership (63%). Furthermore, problems were identified with written communication in that notes and letters do not always reach parents.	Collaborative parent-teacher exploration of ways to improve communication Putting in place of activities that would result in enhanced communication
Accountability	Parents did not mention accountability nor was there any sense in their replies that the school was accountable to them.	Raising of awareness of a sense of accountability, perhaps through joint goal-setting and the monitoring of the achievement of those goals
Planning	Parents have been included in the formulation of most organizational policies but no curricular plans or policies. While two focus groups identified joint goal-setting as a meaning of partnership, no individual parent in either the general or at-risk category mentioned it.	Parental involvement in planning in curricular areas
Ethos/Learning Environment	No individual parent, parent at risk or focus group identified the creation of a learning environment as an element of partnership nor was it mentioned that they had collaborated with teachers in the creation of such an environment. The inclusion of parents in the formation of discipline and anti-bullying policy means that they have, in effect, collaborated with teachers in the creation of an environment that is supportive of learning.	Collaborative parent-teacher development of school environment to ensure maximum support by that environment for children's learning

Decision-making	Collaborative decision-making was only weakly identified as an aspect of partnership. Statistical school data indicated that membership of the Parents' Association was confined to a small number of parents. Parents have two representatives on the Board of Management.	Investigation of areas in which parents and teachers could engage in joint decision-making
Collaboration with broader community	While school personnel actively collaborate with the broader community, data from the pre-action phase indicates that parents are not aware of this collaboration as an aspect of partnership. Parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage feel poorly supported by the broader community.	Exploration of areas in which collaboration with the broader community can be fostered to enhance educational outcomes

5.2.1.3 <u>Constructing the general plan</u>

In the second term of the 2006/2007 school year, letters of invitation (Appendix III) were sent to all parents in one Junior Infant class (20 pupils) inviting them to attend a meeting with a view to deciding on action to be taken, based on the pre-action findings. The time arranged for the meeting was first thing in the morning, a time identified heretofore (i.e., before the action research) by parents in St. Mary's as the most suitable time for parent meetings. Both the researcher and the HSCL Coordinator also personally invited the parents to attend when they met them bringing their children to school or collecting them. A special effort was made by both the researcher and HSCL Coordinator to ensure that parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage were invited. The HSCL Coordinator visited the homes of the latter parents to personally deliver the invitation.

When no parent, whether falling into the category of parent whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage or otherwise, attended the meeting, the researcher decided to phone the parents individually to ask them to attend a further

meeting arranged for the following week. Each of the first five parents spoken to had work or family commitments and would not be able to attend. During the sixth conversation, the researcher became aware that there was going to be another refusal and, hoping to change the parent's mind, suggested that we could plan a *fun* event, and instantly the parent responded by saying that perhaps she could re-arrange her schedule to be there. In subsequent conversations, the researcher was careful to include the word *fun.* The use of this word did not stem from any insights gleaned either at the pre-action phase or in the literature but rather from the previous knowledge and experience of the researcher in her work with parents. Sometimes an enticement, or dissipation of fear of 'serious' events, is needed to encourage parental attendance at events and, in this case, the word *fun* was the catalyst; six parents agreed to come to the meeting, representing almost 33% of possible parents.

The researcher was ever mindful of her wish to include parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage. None of the parents who volunteered fell into this category and it was obvious that much work was needed to encourage attendance by these reluctant parents. None of the six volunteering parents had been involved in any classroom-based activities up to this point although some had given their views at the pre-action phase and were, therefore, aware of the action research project.

The meeting, which was attended by six parents, the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher, was semi-structured. While the researcher would have wished for an in-depth consideration by the group of both the common understanding

of partnership, gleaned in the pre-action spiral, and the Education Act, 1998 requirements as well as Epstein's involvement types, before deciding on action, this was not possible as the meeting was structured with a view to keeping the interest of the parents. In the view of the researcher at that time, the agenda of the meeting had to be kept as simple as possible in order to maintain the interest and confidence of the parents.

At the start of the meeting, the researcher reminded the parents of the research goal of increasing parent-school partnership. She briefly outlined the findings from the pre-action stage of the research and indicated areas in which the need for development had been identified. The meeting was then open to the floor for comments/suggestions. One of the parents was particularly interested in art and suggested organising an art activity for the children. This proved to be a popular idea with the other parents and so the seeds of a 'Junior Infant Fun Day' were sown. While the planned 'fun day' may be considered a very small step, it would constitute a big step for these parents towards increasing parental involvement, an area shown by the pre-action data to need improvement. As outlined in Table 14 (pp. 267-269), above, while 18% of individual parents who gave their views at pre-action stage felt that involvement was one of the meanings of partnership, only 13% said partnership had resulted in increased involvement for them. The planned fun day would also constitute the foundation stone of a new structure in the school to ensure that the education system would be conducted in a spirit of partnership (Education Act, 1998, Long Title).

5.2.1.4 <u>Developing the next action steps</u>

The above group, consisting of six parents (henceforth referred to as 'the planning parents'), the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher, arranged for a planning meeting to take place the following week. It was decided that all three of the Junior Infant classes would be included in the proposed fun day as to restrict it to just one class might cause bad feeling amongst the parents of the other two. The group invited the class teachers to the planning meeting. At this planning meeting, teachers, planning parents, HSCL Coordinator and researcher made plans for the fun day, down to the smallest detail. A timetable was arranged. The planned activities were recorded. A list of required resources was compiled. Responsibilities were assigned, both for acquiring the resources and for undertaking the tasks on the day. Letters were sent out inviting other interested and available parents to come and participate on the day. Parents were verbally invited to participate by the HSCL Coordinator, class teachers and researcher when they met them bringing their children to and from school.

5.2.1.5 <u>Implementing the next action steps</u>

On fun day, the children, fifty-six in total, were divided into five groups. Five activity areas or stations were created and each group had an allotted time at each station. Parents took charge of each activity station. The class teachers supervised the children, brought them from activity to activity and provided help and guidance to the children. The activities consisted of playground games, PE games, storybook reading and two art activities. Between 9 A.M. and 12.30 P.M. all of the children had got a turn at each station and each had had his/her face painted. The day ended, after lunch, with a party and a disco.

There was an aesthetic outcome from the day also – the children and parents created a seaside collage which was displayed on the corridor.

Twelve parents took part in the fun day. This consisted of the planning parents plus six additional parents who volunteered to participate on the day. Two of these volunteering parents were parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage.

After the fun day, a meeting was held to evaluate the action. The outcomes of this evaluation were used in the reconnaissance phase of the next mini-spiral. (See below, pp. 274 -276.)

Inspired and enthused by the success of the fun day, the parents in the planning group, in consultation with the researcher, the HSCL Coordinator and the class teachers, decided to plan and implement a Christmas art and craft activity for the children. (By then, the children had progressed into Senior Infants.) This was done in December 2007. These two occasions, the fun day and the Christmas art and craft activity, constituted the first time in the history of the school that a group of parents and teachers had together planned, resourced and implemented classroom activities and it was also the first time that the impetus for the activity had come from parents.

5.2.2 First action spiral: Mini-Spiral Two

A consciousness of the Revised Curriculum emerged in the second mini-spiral, in which the parents who had planned the Infant fun day and Christmas art and

craft activity planned an inter-curricular activity for the same children, now in Senior Infants.

5.2.2.1 <u>Identifying and clarifying the general idea</u>

By now, while the general idea, viz., to increase parent-school partnership in St. Mary's, remained the same, there was a slight shift in emphasis and a change in the partnership process. Heretofore, all parental involvement activities in classrooms (e.g., paired reading, *Maths for Fun*) had been teacher led and guided while now, parents had decided on two classroom involvement activities and had planned and implemented them in collaboration with the teachers. (See Appendix XI for information on *Maths for Fun*.) Table 14 (pp. 267-269), above, shows that, based on the information gathered at pre-action stage, a need existed for more parental involvement at school and parental involvement in planning. Mini-Spiral One of the first action spiral succeeded in increasing both parental involvement at school and parental involvement in planning classroom activities.

5.2.2.2 <u>Reconnaissance</u>

A meeting was held after the Junior Infant fun day to evaluate the day. The meeting was attended by the planning parents, the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher. The findings of that evaluation are now presented. This evaluation would constitute the reconnaissance that would lead to the next stage of the research. The evaluation consisted of an unstructured interview where parents simply spoke about their experiences. The researcher organised the material, when presenting it below, under thematic headings. Where a parent is quoted,

the quotation may be taken as a fair example of views put forward by parents in the group, unless otherwise stated.

5.2.2.2.1 *General impressions of the day*

There was general agreement that the day was very successful and was 'great for a first attempt.' A mother spoke of the feedback from parents at lunch: 'They all wanted to be involved, saying we should do this more often.'

5.2.2.2.2 *Advantages of being involved*

The parents agreed that it was definitely good to be involved. One parent stated: 'It's nice for the parents to get to know their child's friends in the classroom and to know where they're at with their friends and to see how they're interacting with them.' Another parent 'got to know a number of parents from the other classes.'

The parents enjoyed seeing how the children worked and the children's obvious enjoyment of the activities.

5.2.2.2.3 *Reflections on planning further activities*

The parents were confident that they could arrange another similar activity. Reflecting on whether they could plan activities for older children, one mother had the following to say:

> Well, I'd say for the Senior Infants, First Class …. From there up it gets harder, they're older. The Junior and Senior Infants, a day like that would go down very well again. It would be harder if the children were older. I don't know would you be able to hold their attention for the day like we were able to hold theirs.

5.2.2.2.4   Involving other parents

In the opinion of one mother, 'a lot of parents don't realise what's going on in here' (i.e., in the school). Stating that it would be a good idea to do a follow-up activity, another felt that 'when parents see it's not so serious they wouldn't be afraid.' Sending notes home to tell parents about activities invited the following comment: 'You send a note and people say, "I didn't know anything about it," but that note was probably all wrong.' Speaking of parents reluctant to participate, one mother remarked, 'They can't be shy anymore! They have to be involved.'

5.2.2.3 Constructing the general plan

At the start of the 2007/2008 school year, the group of parents who had planned the Junior Infant fun day, together with the HSCL Coordinator and researcher, decided to work from the reconnaissance findings (pp. 274-276) to develop another involvement activity. This decision came about due to three reasons. The first was that the planning parents, together with the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher, were conscious of the need, identified at pre-action stage and outlined in Table 14, above, to increase parental involvement. The second reason was that, at pre-action stage, it emerged from the findings that no individual parent, case study parent or focus group identified the creation of a learning environment as an element of partnership nor was it mentioned that they had collaborated with teachers in the creation of such an environment. (See Table 14, pp. 267-269.) The third reason was that the reconnaissance had shown that the parents saw being involved as both

advantageous and enjoyable and that they were capable of organising an activity.

The parents began to look to the historic locality in which the school was set as a basis for the next activity. Their children were now in Senior Infants so they decided to consult with the Senior Infant class teachers about the relevance and feasibility of taking the children from the Senior Infant classes on a history walk. The teachers regarded this as feasible and very relevant since 'personal and local history' is part of the history curriculum at infant level (Department of Education and Science 1999b, 17). (See Appendix V.) As an art activity would be included, following the walk, the 'history' walk would in fact incorporate and integrate a few subjects from the Revised Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999), viz., History, Geography, Visual Arts and Social, Personal and Health Education. (See Appendix V.) Since history was the principal curricular area covered by the walk, it will be referred to in this dissertation as the 'history walk.'

5.2.2.4 <u>Developing the next action steps</u>

The parent group, together with the HSCL Coordinator, set out on an exploratory walk of the local area. (The researcher was unavailable on this day.) There were many interesting features to be explored, including two churches (one dating from 1726), an old butter exchange building (dating from 1770), a sweet factory and a hospital which has been converted into a hotel. Bearing in mind the age of the children, the parent group and HSCL Coordinator planned a route and negotiated entry to the buildings with the

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appropriate authorities where necessary. They consulted with the teachers on practical matters, e.g., how the walk would best suit curricular requirements, what would be a suitable day and time for the walk, what the children would need to bring and safety issues.

5.2.2.5 <u>Implementing the next action steps</u>

The children were divided into groups for the walk and each group had at least two adult leaders (parents/grandparents and teachers). The departure time for the groups was staggered to ensure that only one group would be in a given location at any time.

The walk was followed by an art activity in the classroom on the following week. A model of a local historic church and a streetscape were created and displayed.

At a post-history walk meeting, the action was evaluated. This evaluation was used for reconnaissance purposes in the next mini-spiral. (See below, p. 280.)

The success of the history walk, jointly planned and organised by parents and teachers, quickly became apparent when requests started coming in from other class teachers for similar events to be organised for their classes. This signals an important development because teachers sometimes have fears around parental involvement and may even resist such involvement (Lareau 1997, Lightfoot 1978, McKibbin et al. 1998, Rasinski and Fredericks 1989, Vincent 1993). The Junior Infant planning parents readily agreed to share their expertise

with other parents and teachers. The affirmation felt following invitations to extend the involvement activity to other classes coupled with the confidence generated by the success of the walk led to the next mini-spiral which consisted of a formal contribution by the Junior Infant parents to the school plan. (See Appendix IV for information on the school plan.)

5.2.3   First action spiral: Mini-Spiral Three

In the third mini-spiral, the parent group extended their plan for the inter-curricular activity to include all classes in the school. This whole-school activity was written into the curricular (history) section of the school plan.

5.2.3.1 <u>Identifying and clarifying the general idea</u>

Parent-school partnership in St. Mary's had by now changed, substantially, in nature since the start of the action research. Parents had progressed from planning and implementing a fun day to planning and implementing an inter-curricular activity. The number of parents engaged in this new partnership was comparatively small but the dynamic nature of the partnership was encouraging and exciting. The planning parents were now actively seeking ways to increase the number of involved parents and to overcome barriers to involvement as well as ways to improve the learning environment of the school. As has been shown in Table 14 (pp. 267-269), above, pre-action data indicated that general parental involvement, parental involvement in planning and the participation of parents in the creation of a learning environment were areas in need of attention. Mini-Spiral Two of the first action spiral saw an increase in all three areas, progressing from general classroom involvement in Mini-Spiral One to a

curricular involvement in Mini-Spiral Two. Mini-Spiral Two also saw parents and teachers engaged together in enhancing the children's learning environment. They did this by extending the learning environment beyond the school walls into the surrounding locality.

5.2.3.2 <u>Reconnaissance</u>

A meeting was held to evaluate the history walk. This meeting was attended by the planning parents as well as the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher. This group agreed that the walk had been both successful and enjoyable for adults and children. It was also agreed that the format of the walk, i.e., the division of the children into small groups with adult leaders, was effective. Seeing the children's reactions was deemed to be the most enjoyable aspect for parents. The most fulfilling aspect of the walk from an educational viewpoint was, for them, the fact that they could discuss the event at home with their children and that this aspect of the curriculum, i.e., local history, had much more relevance for the parents than heretofore.

Arising from this evaluation and from requests from parents and teachers of other classes, the parents in the group expressed an eagerness to put a similar activity in place for each class in the school. They had ideas for what could be done at each class level and were anxious to consult with class teachers about these ideas. It was clear to both the HSCL Coordinator and to the researcher (neither one from the local area) that the parents were bringing a level of knowledge to planning for the teaching of local history heretofore untapped by the school. As well as being very familiar with the local area, they knew who

lived in each house and the stories these people would have to tell. Since these people were the parents' neighbours, it would be much easier for parents to elicit their co-operation in any project undertaken than if they were approached by teachers, who are strangers.

This group thus passed quite naturally and organically from 'doing a history walk' (via a fun day) to preparing a document for insertion in the curricular section of the school plan. (See Appendix IV for information on the school plan.) As noted in Table 13 (p. 264), above, no individual parent or focus group mentioned collaborative planning with regard to the school plan as an understanding of partnership at pre-action stage. The Education Act, 1998 (Article 21:3) states: 'The school plan shall be prepared in accordance with such directions relating to consultation with the parents, the patron, staff and students of the school.' It furthermore stipulates that 'the Principal shall, under the direction of the board and, in consultation with the teachers, the parents and, to the extent appropriate to their age and experience, the students, set objectives for the school and monitor the achievement of those objectives' (Article 23:2d). While parents in St. Mary's had, heretofore, been involved in formulating school policies in organizational areas (e.g., Code of Discipline, Anti-Bullying Policy, Substance Misuse Policy, Homework Policy, Retention Policy), to date they had not participated in setting curriculum objectives and formulating curricular plans.

5.2.3.3 <u>Constructing the general plan</u>

Bearing in mind the ages of the children at each class level, the planning parents, in consultation with the HSCL Coordinator, the researcher and the class teachers, devised local history activities for each class level in the school for inclusion in the curricular section of the school plan. First and Second Classes would have a history walk similar to the one done with Infants. Third and Fourth Classes would have a tour of two local historic buildings. Fifth and Sixth Classes would study the houses, shops and shop fronts on a nearby street, where a number of 'stations' would be set up. At each station, the pupils would be able to talk with an interesting, long-standing resident of the area. The proceedings would be tape-recorded (with permission) and photographed.

Finally, the parents wished for a very visible area in the school (e.g., an entrance lobby) to be set aside for a display of photographs, art work, artefacts and other material relevant to the history projects.

5.2.3.4 <u>Developing the next action steps</u>

Having constructed a plan for inclusion in the curricular section of the school plan, a plan that allowed for parent involvement, the next step was to present the plan to the teachers from each class level to evaluate and, if necessary, make amendments. Dates were arranged for implementing the plan at each class level.

5.2.3.5 <u>Implementing the next action steps</u>

During the course of the school year, the plan was implemented and, at the time of writing, i.e., the start of the third term of the 2007/2008 school year, the plan has been implemented with all classes except Fifth and Sixth Classes, who will participate in the history walk at a later date. The total number of participating parents from all class levels (excluding Fifth and Sixth Classes) was twenty-eight. This number comprised the six planning parents and twenty-two other parents. The latter group included just one parent of a child who may be at risk of educational disadvantage. This particular parent had also been involved in the Junior Infant Fun Day. (See p. 273.)

5.2.4   First action spiral: Evaluation

The first action spiral was evaluated at three levels. A questionnaire was distributed to all parents who had participated in the history walk, but had not been involved in the planning, at all class levels to elicit their views on the activity. A further questionnaire was completed by the six parents in the planning group to determine their views on the process in which they had been engaged because their experience would be different to that of the parents who had simply gone on the history walk. Finally, the six parents in the planning group were interviewed at post-action stage, using the same interview questions as were used at pre-action stage. The findings from the two questionnaires will be presented now and the findings from the post-action interviews will be presented at the end of the chapter in conjunction with the findings from the interviews with Second Class parents who had been involved in the second action spiral.

5.2.4.1 <u>Evaluation conducted with parents who had participated in the history walk but who had not been involved in the planning</u>

Parents who had participated in the history walk but who had not been involved in the planning (22 in total) were asked to complete a questionnaire. (Appendix VI). The first question sought to establish how the participating parents had heard about the walk. The parents were then asked to indicate their level of agreement, using a five-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree), with the following statements:

1. The history walk with my child's class was enjoyable for me.

2. The history walk with my child's class was enjoyable for my child.

3. My child likes it when I take part in school activities.

4. The history walk helped me learn about my child's history curriculum.

5. It is important for parents to take part in activities in their child's school, if they can.

6. The history walk was a good learning activity for the children.

7. I would like to take part in a similar activity in the future.

8. I would be willing to plan a similar activity with other parents in the future.

9. The history walk helped me to get to know other parents.

10. The history walk improved partnership between home and school.

Finally, parents were asked to list ways in which the activity could have been improved and to add other comments, if they wished.

The questionnaire was completed and returned by 15 of the 22 parents, constituting a 68% return rate. Eight of the 15 respondents had been informed of the activity by the class teacher and the remainder indicated that they were informed by letter. All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that the walk was enjoyable for themselves and their children. Again, every respondent either agreed or strongly agreed that his/her child likes it when he/she takes part in school activities, that the history walk helped him/her learn more about the child's history curriculum, that the walk was a good learning activity for the children, that he/she would be willing to take part in a similar activity in the future and that the walk helped the parent to get to know other parents. One parent was not sure whether it is important for parents to take part in activities in their child's school, if they can, but all other respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it was. Three parents were not sure as to whether they would be willing to plan a similar activity with other parents in the future but all the rest either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be willing. One of those who was not sure explained that his/her own parents were unwell, hence he/she could not make a commitment. There was just one parent who did not either agree or strongly agree that the walk had improved home/school partnership. That parent was not sure.

Those who chose to add comments were largely positive about the walk. One parent stated, 'I really enjoyed the experience and actually learned a few things myself,' another, 'I think everything important has been covered in the walk and it was very enjoyable for both child and adult.' There were some ideas for improvement. One parent suggested that the children be shown photos or

slides of the area long ago, before they went on the walk, and that they could then make a comparison to the buildings as they are today. Another thought that it would have been better if the children had a lunch break before the trip because 'a lot of them complained they were hungry.' In another's view, it was 'a small bit too long' and there was too much information for the 7-8 year-olds. Yet another parent thought that a tour of the sweet factory would have been beneficial.

5.2.4.2 <u>Evaluation conducted with Junior Infant parents who had been involved in planning throughout the first action spiral</u>

The parents in the planning group completed a questionnaire (Appendix VII) in which, using a five-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree), they indicated their level of agreement with the statements below. All six parents either agreed or strongly agreed with all of the statements.

1. Being involved in the planning group for the fun day, Christmas art and craft day and history walk helped me learn more about my child's education.

2. Being involved helped me learn more about my child's school.

3. Being involved made me feel that I had made an increased contribution to my child's education.

4. Being involved made me feel that I had contributed to the education of children in the school besides my own.

5. Being involved increased co-operation between home and school.

6. The activities increased partnership between home and school.

7. Being involved was an enjoyable experience for me.

8. It is important for parents to be involved in formulating the school plan.

9. I would be willing to be involved in a similar planning activity in the future.

The parents were asked to comment, if they wished, on their involvement. One mother's response may fairly be taken as representative. She wrote:

> As a parent I myself found that being involved was as beneficial to me as my daughter. I did play dough with the children on the fun day and I thought the children loved the idea of one of their friend's parents doing the activity with them. The feedback from the children on the day was great as we had shapes available for them but in the end the children used their own imagination and gave me ideas as well. I was also involved with the history walk and I was a helper on the morning in question. The children I found enjoyed it a lot. They listened to a few stories on the making of sweets, saw the smallest book (in Cork) with amazement. Questions were flying out of their mouths about the whole morning. I myself even enjoyed ringing the (Church) bells as much as the children did. I found that the walk was well organised by teachers and parents. When I went to school it was all about teachers and students. I love the idea now that parents can get involved with planning and taking part in the activities in schools today and that the principal and teachers take on board the parents' ideas and objectives. May it long continue.

5.3 Second action spiral: Action research with parents of children in Second Class

5.3.1 Second action spiral: Mini-Spiral One

5.3.1.1 Identifying and clarifying the general idea

The general idea for this spiral was exactly the same as that at the start of the spiral for Junior Infants parents. (See p. 258.) To remind the reader, in the 2006/2007 school year we had a common understanding of parent-school partnership acquired at pre-action stage and 100% agreement from the parents interviewed that this partnership is an essential component of children's education. It was now our task, armed with the common understanding

available, to identify ways to increase parent-school partnership in St. Mary's with Second Class parents, i.e., children in their fourth year in school, aged 7-8 years.

5.3.1.2 Reconnaissance

As in the case of the Junior Infant parents, the aim in the case of the Second Class parents was to initiate action, based on the identification of needs acquired through an analysis of the data collected at the pre-action phase, which would lead to improvement and change in the school. This action would be decided upon by the parents of Second Class children, in consultation with the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher.

5.3.1.3 Constructing the general plan

In February 2007, a letter was sent to the parents of each child in one Second Class (17 children in total) requesting them to come to a meeting to devise a parental involvement activity for the purpose of implementing the action aspect of the action research. (See Appendix III.) The proposed time for the meeting was early in the morning, a time deemed most suitable heretofore (i.e., before the action research project) for meetings by parents in St. Mary's. As in the case of Junior Infant parents, no parent came to the meeting.

The researcher then contacted the parents personally and discovered that many parents of Second Class children were already involved in a classroom activity, *Maths for Fun* (Appendix XI), where parents came into the classroom once a week, at an appointed time, to play maths games with the children. This greatly

reduced the number of parents available to participate in an activity connected with the action research.

5.3.1.4 Developing the next action steps

At this time the researcher, in her role as principal, and independent of the action research process, had sent out a letter inviting parents to be part of a policy making group on parental involvement. The Department of Education and Science had written to all schools in the School Support Programme (SSP) (Department of Education and Science 2005) stipulating that these schools should have a three-year action plan in place by the end of the 2007 calendar year. The development of a three-year action plan in schools in the SSP is required under the DEIS Action Plan (Department of Education and Science 2005). (See Appendix VIII for excerpt from DEIS Action Plan dealing with three-year action plans.) The proposed parental involvement policy would be included in the organisational section of the school plan (Appendix IV) and would constitute part of the school's three-year plan. Letters were sent to all parents in the school inviting them to take part in this policy-making and, of the seven parents who responded, four were parents of children in Second Class.

We now had a situation where four parents of children from Second Class had indicated their willingness to be part of a policy-making group and where the researcher had failed to get any parents from the same class to attend a meeting to organize a parental involvement activity arising from the pre-action data. The researcher decided to ask these four parents if they would work with her and with the HSCL Coordinator to devise and implement a parental

involvement/partnership activity. This would be done as part of the policy development on parental involvement. The parents were happy to do this. The researcher hoped that working on policy making would lead organically to an involvement activity. This, in fact, is what happened. It is interesting to note that in this action research spiral, with the Second Class parents, school planning led to an involvement activity whereas the opposite happened with the Junior Infant parents, i.e., the activity led to school planning. It should be noted that this work with the parents who volunteered for policy development work could be considered to address the following issues identified in Table 14 (pp. 267-269), above, i.e., the lack of inclusion of general consultation as either an understanding or outcome of partnership by focus groups and individual parents as well as the lack of inclusion in the understanding of these groups of consultation regarding the school plan.

5.3.1.5 <u>Implementing the next action steps</u>

The group to formulate policy on parental partnership met once a week, for six weeks, for an hour-long session in the afternoons. The group was led by an independent facilitator and comprised the seven parents who originally responded, including the four Second Class parents, and three teachers, viz., the HSCL Coordinator, the researcher and one other teacher. The independent facilitator had worked on many occasions already with parents and teachers in St. Mary's on policy formation and had worked with the present research during the pre-action spiral. (See p. 208.) The role of the independent facilitator at the policy formation sessions was to guide the sessions and to keep participants closely focused on the relevant agenda.

In compiling the draft policy, a model was used which had been used in the school to formulate an earlier policy on parental involvement. Agenda were drawn up in advance of the policy formation sessions, by the HSCL Coordinator and researcher, using the previous model. Minutes of the sessions are provided in Appendix IX.

At the first policy-formation session, hopes/expectations for the pupils of the school were identified from the viewpoint of both parents and teachers. At this session also, the respective roles of parents and teachers in the children's education were identified. At the second session, the group continued to explore parent/teacher roles, especially in relation to how the roles overlap and how teachers and parents respect each others' roles. At this second session also, the fears of parents and teachers for the children were identified. During the third session, parents and teachers considered how they work in co-operation and identified both present and future involvement activities. During the fourth session the role of the parents in school planning was considered. An analysis of current parent-teacher collaborative planning practices was carried out and areas in which future collaborative planning could take place were identified. At the fifth session, the group considered becoming involved in curricular planning. It was agreed that parents had not heretofore been involved in curriculum planning; that this planning had, up to then, been undertaken by the teaching staff. It was decided by the group that planning in the area of visual arts, which was seen by the parents in the group as a non-threatening area, would be undertaken as part of the current policy development. At this fifth

session a list was compiled of the ways in which parents could be involved with their children's art, both at home and at school. As part of this, the parents suggested that they could be involved in making the school grounds more aesthetically pleasing. (The implementation of this latter part of the plan will be described in the next mini-spiral.) At the final planning session, the draft policy was completed. (See Appendix X.) It was now ready for presentation to the Parents' Association and teaching staff for consideration/amendment and subsequent submission for ratification to the Board of Management.

5.3.2 Second action spiral: Mini-Spiral Two

5.3.2.1 <u>Identifying and clarifying the general idea</u>

A group of parents, including parents of Second Class children, wished to implement an outdoor project at St. Mary's School. The aim of the project was to make the school grounds more aesthetically pleasing and, in the process, to increase parent-school partnership at St. Mary's.

During the first mini-spiral with Second Class parents, parents had been involved in school planning, thereby addressing two needs identified at pre-planning, viz., a need to increase parental involvement and a need for parents to be consulted with regard to the school plan. This new mini-spiral would see another issue identified in Table 14 (pp. 267-269) addressed, viz., the need for parents to be involved, with teachers, in creating a school environment supportive of learning.

5.3.2.2 <u>Reconnaissance</u>

A difficulty, already referred to, was encountered in trying to engage the parents of the Second Class children in this action research project. It was noted that some of the parents were already involved in a *Maths for Fun* activity and it was proving difficult to get them to participate in further activities. From conversations with parents, it was clear that the time available to them to participate in school activities is limited. In this instance, perhaps the choice of class to participate in the action research was unwise, and should have been foreseen, as some of these parents were already involved in another activity. On the other hand, we had the interesting situation that more than half of the parents who volunteered to take part in policy-making were already involved in *Maths for Fun.* Why did these four parents agree to take part in policy making but did not come to the meeting to plan a parental involvement activity? Again, from conversations with parents a fault in communication was noted. The parents referred to the vagueness of invitations from the school. They said that they get invitations to be involved in organising a parental involvement activity but have no clear idea of what this entails. The parents who volunteered for policy making had a clear idea just what it was would be required of them. A lesson can be learned from this and put to good use when informing parents of involvement activities.

5.3.2.3 <u>Constructing the general plan</u>

The agreed plan consisted of two separate elements, both addressing issues identified in Table 14 (pp. 267-269). The first involved parents organising planting activities with children in the school grounds. The impetus for the

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second came from parents' observations of a playground in a neighbouring school. The parents had seen a beautiful mural painted on a wall in a playground in a local boys' school by the children in that school, under the direction of an artist. Could we, the parents wondered, undertake a similar project in our school? It was decided to investigate and see if this would be possible.

5.3.2.4 Developing the next action steps

Organising the planting began straight away. The parents, in consultation with the teachers, decided which plants the children and parents would plant. A list of resources required was drawn up. Safety issues were discussed and a timetable was formulated.

Investigations also began into the possibility of painting a mural on a playground wall. The HSCL Coordinator received permission from the principal of the neighbouring school to visit and view its mural. The HSCL Coordinator and a group of planning parents visited that neighbouring school where the HSCL Coordinator in that school explained what had been involved in creating the mural. The organization and painting of the mural had been managed and facilitated by a visiting artist, commissioned by the school for this purpose. The artist worked with all classes in the school. She helped the children plan and design the mural. This process took a number of weeks before the painting began. The artist then helped the children paint the mural.

The planning group had then to investigate whether this project could be replicated in our school. A proposal was submitted to the Board of Management and permission was granted by the Board to proceed with planning for the mural. The artist who had worked on the project in the neighbouring school agreed to work also with us and to involve parents in the project. The walls in the four playgrounds were examined. The wall which was deemed most suitable was one that was due for repair. This meant that, in the course of repair, a surface suitable for painting could be put on the wall. Costings were made. Permission for the project was sought and received from the Board of Management. We were now ready to go, pending the repair of the wall.

5.3.2.5 Implementing the next action steps
The planting, involving parents and children, took place in the last term of the 2006/2007 school year.

Not everything goes according to plan and the repair of the wall proved more complicated than had been thought. At the time of writing, the wall still has not been repaired. The plan to paint the mural is in place. All the details have been arranged and the action will begin when the wall is repaired.

5.3.3   Second action spiral: Evaluation
The second action spiral was evaluated at two levels. A meeting was held after the planting activity to assess the effectiveness of the activity. A questionnaire

was distributed to all parents who had participated in the policy formation to elicit their views on this activity.

5.3.3.1 Evaluation of planting activity

Data from the meeting to evaluate the planting activity revealed that the parents involved in the planting activity were satisfied that the activity had been a success. Both they and the children had enjoyed the experience. The activity had given the parents an insight into one reality of teaching. The following statement by a parent was representative of other parental comments:

> I found with the group, when they were planting outside, one or two of the girls had no interest. They were more interested in talking than in planting. I think they still enjoyed what they were doing but they still liked to have the bit of chat along the way. (I said) 'You have to focus on this, this is what you have to do, this is what it's all about. This is what we're here for, not to be listening to stories.'

The activity also allowed the parents to communicate with the children. A parent commented:

> I enjoyed the experience of communicating and talking with other children besides my own. It's enjoyable to speak to other children that young, I found.

5.3.3.2 Evaluation of involvement in policy formation

The parents in the group engaged in policy formation completed a questionnaire (Appendix VII) in which, using a five-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree), they indicated their level of agreement with the statements below. All four parents either agreed or strongly agreed with all of the statements.

1. Being involved in the policy formation group helped me learn more about my child's education.

2. Being involved helped me learn more about my child's school.

3. Being involved made me feel that I had made an increased contribution to my child's education.

4. Being involved made me feel that I had contributed to the education of children in the school besides my own.

5. Being involved increased co-operation between home and school.

6. The activities increased partnership between home and school.

7. Being involved was an enjoyable experience for me.

8. It is important for parents to be involved in formulating the school plan.

9. I would be willing to be involved in a similar planning activity in the future.

The parents were asked to comment, if they wished, on their involvement. The following comment summed up parental views:

> I found the experience of being in the policy group interesting and enjoyable. It was great to have a say in what's going on in the school and I think a lot more parents should be involved in this way.

5.4 Findings from interviews carried out with parents involved in planning first and second action spirals (i.e., parents of Junior Infant and Second Class children)

At the end of the first and second action spirals, parents who had participated in planning, i.e., the six parents who had planned the Junior and Senior Infant activities and who had contributed to the school history plan, as well as the four parents involved in formulating the parental involvement policy, were interviewed using the same interview questions used to gather information at the pre-planning phase. It should be noted that the views of the ten participating

parents at post-action are compared with the views of the sixty-eight individual parents and eight focus groups who gave their views at pre-action stage. The object of this was to compare general pre-action understandings/responses with post-action understandings/responses of parents who had been involved in the main action spirals and to note any differences. In the case of each question, for comparison purposes, a table will be presented showing pre- and post-action findings.

5.4.1 Question 1: What, in your opinion, is parent-school partnership?

Findings from Question 1 at pre-action stage are presented in Chapter Four, pp. 211-219.

Table 15: Findings from Question 1 (Pre-action and post-action)

Parental understanding of home/school partnership	Percentage of individual parents who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase (Actual number of parents who expressed this understanding in brackets followed by total number of parents who gave views at pre-action stage)	Number of focus groups who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase followed by total number of groups who gave views at pre-action stage	Number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two who expressed this understanding at post-action phase followed by total number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two
Communication	63% (43/68)	3/8	10/10
Co-operation	44% (30/68)	5/8	10/10
School involvement	18% (12/68)	4/8	10/10
Listening with respect	13% (9/68)	1/6	10/10
Support for parents	7% (5/68)	0/8	7/10
Support for teacher	0% (0/68)	0/8	5/10

Good home/school relationship	7% (5/68)	0/8	10/10
Home/School Links	4% (3/68)	0/8	10/10
Parents feeling welcome	4% (3/68)	2/8	10/10
Common parent-teacher interest	4% (3/68)	0/8	0/10
Membership of Parents' Association	3% (2/68)	0/8	3/10
Carrying out attendance checks	1% (1/68)	0/8	0/10
Mutual parent-teacher trust	1% (1/68)	0/8	8/10
Parents and teachers being on same mind	0% (0/68)	2/8	0/10
Joint decision-making	0% (0/68)	2/8	10/10
Joint responsibility	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Parents feeling part of the system	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10

There is a considerable difference in the understandings of partnership of parents at post-action stage to those expressed by parents at pre-action. At post-action stage, for all of the participating parents, understandings of partnership include communication, collaboration, involvement, listening with respect, good home-school relationships and links and joint decision-making. While communication and collaboration featured reasonably strongly in pre-action understandings, involvement featured less strongly and the post-action inclusion of involvement as an understanding by all parents reflects the increased, sustained and unanimously positive experience of involvement all of these parents have had during the action. (See findings from questionnaires, pp. 284 and 296). The most important finding at post-action is the inclusion of joint

decision-making as an understanding of partnership. As will be observed from Table 14 (pp. 267-269), joint decision-making did not feature in the understandings of individual parents at pre-action stage, despite the fact that being consulted, both generally and with regard to the school plan, is a requirement under the Education Act, 1998 (Articles 6g, 9d). Another salient feature of post-action findings is the importance accorded, in the parents' understandings of partnership, to partnership as a support for parents and teachers. Particularly noticeable in their comments was the emphasis on the support parents could get from other parents through partnership. This support was conceptualized in two ways. The first support is the support needed to get parents involved in partnership and given to them, in this context, by other parents because, as we shall see especially in the next chapter dealing with parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage, some parents are nervous or afraid to come into the school if they do not know other parents. One parent spoke of the encouragement she had given to a parent who was reluctant to come to an involvement activity:

> Myself and Deborah (another parent, not real name) met this Mum who was afraid to come down because she didn't know other parents so she decided that she wanted to build her confidence more and came down on the day and enjoyed it immensely. She loved it.

The second support is the support parents get from each other. One parent spoke of a particular problem she had had with her child and of the fact that she was able to come into the school and discuss this problem with and feel supported by other parents.

Other representative comments in this section from parents included:

'Partnership is joint decision making for your child.'

'Partnership is when we decide on something and act on it and the outcome is that children are happy to see their parents in the class.'

'Partnership is when parents respect teachers and vice-versa. We know each other's boundaries.'

5.4.2 Question 2: How important is it to have partnership between parents and school?

Findings from Question 2 at pre-action stage are presented in Chapter Four, pp. 223-230.

Table 16: Findings from Question 2: Pre-action and post-action

Parental understanding of importance of parent-school partnership (Main understandings)	Percentage of individual parents who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase (Actual number of parents who expressed this understanding in brackets followed by total number of parents who gave views at pre-action stage)	Number of focus groups who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase followed by total number of groups who gave views at pre-action stage	Number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two who expressed this understanding at post-action phase followed by total number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two
Communication	65% (44/68)	5/8	10/10
Child's Welfare	37% (25/68)	5/8	10/10
Learning outcomes for child	0% (0/68)	0/8	10/10
To increase parents' knowledge of curriculum	0 (0%)	0/8	7/10
Increased involvement	9% (6/68)	0/8	10/10
Parental outcomes	7% (5/68)	2/8	10/10
Valuing parental opinions	6% (4/68)	0/8	10/10

Parental rights to involvement	4% (3/68)	0/8	0/10
Facilitation of parent-teacher relationship	4% (3/68)	1/8	8/10
Welcome in school for parents	4% (3/68)	0/8	7/10
Facilitation of joint decision-making	2% (1/68)	0/8	10/10
Support for teacher	0% (0/68)	3/8	7/10
Lessening of perception of teacher as authority figure	0% (0/68)	0/8	5/10

As in the findings to Question 1, there was a strong emphasis, at both pre-action and post-action stages, on the importance of partnership for communication and for the welfare of the child. The latter consideration is of intrinsic importance to parents and was very evident from parental replies at post-action stage, as well as in their pre-action replies. Of especial importance is the effect partnership has on how children feel. One parent commented at post-action stage:

> I even found when I said to my daughter this morning, 'I'm going down to the kitchen (in school) to have a cup of tea' and it's like as if … I don't know … she loves it and I suppose she knows I'm near her or something like that.

Parents at post-action stage expressed the view that partnership is important to reduce the perception of the teacher as an authority figure which, in the view of parents, is a positive development. Speaking of partnership, one parent summed up views given by other parents when she stated:

> It gives this homely feeling … we can relax in it. It's a case of the teachers are here but the Mums are here as well. It's great for the

children to see the teachers and the mothers to be able to come together as one and I think it takes away that authority thing.

Parents at post-action expressed the importance of partnership for enhancing both parents' knowledge of the curriculum and learning outcomes for the children. A parent considered that 'it's easier for your child to learn if you know what's going on in the school and the classroom.' Another mother spoke of her joy at being able to discuss local history with her child and of the child's increased interest in and knowledge of the locality. She stated:

> The day we went on the history walk we had a great day. She (her daughter) was able to tell me (afterwards) about the sweet factory and that there once was a hospital down the road. The history of that for a five-year-old child to have is fantastic. It's all back to sharing/partnership again.

Parents noted, at post-action stage, that parents could be a support for teachers in the classroom. Parents expressed a new knowledge of the difficulty of teachers' task, especially when there are so many children of varying ability in one class. A parent stated:

> You see it coming in. I mean you have the child who's quick at something and the child that needs a lot of help and the teachers just aren't able to do it all on their own. You can't leave 20 odd behind for one and you can't leave one behind for 20 odd.

Parental understandings of partnership as being important to enable joint decision-making was evident at post-action stage. This understanding was absent at pre-action stage.

5.4.3 Question 3: What do you feel about parent-school partnership in general?

Findings from Question 3 at pre-action stage are presented in Chapter Four, pp. 234-239.

Table 17: Findings from Question 3 (Pre-action and post-action)

Parental feelings about parent-school partnership in general	Percentage of individual parents who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase (Actual number of parents who expressed this understanding in brackets followed by total number of parents who gave views at pre-action stage)	Number of focus groups who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase followed by total number of groups who gave views at pre-action stage	Number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two who expressed this understanding at post-action phase followed by total number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two
Results in benefits for children	9% (6/68)	2/8	10/10
Enhances parent-teacher relationships	9% (6/68)	2/8	10/10
Facilitates home-school communication	7% (5/68)	1/8	10/10
Facilitates parental involvement in school	6% (4/68)	1/8	10/10
Allows parents to understand more about the school system	4% (3/68)	0/8	10/10
Facilitates communication of children's progress	4% (3/68)	0/8	10/10
Facilitates communication of children's problems	4% (3/68)	0/8	4/10

Facilitates mutual understanding between parents and teachers	3% (2/68)	0/8	8/10
Has improved in recent years	0% (0/68)	2/8	6/10
Is promoted by the HSCL Scheme	0% (0/68)	1/8	10/10
Leads to parent/teacher equality	0% (0/68)	1/8	5/10
Enables joint decision making	0% (0/68)	0/8	10/10

Table 17 illustrates the change in general feelings on parent-school partnership at post-action compared to those expressed by parents at pre-action stage. We see joint decision-making emerging again in these findings and we note the very positive feelings expressed by parents concerning enhanced benefits for children and enhanced parent-teacher relationships. All participating parents noted, at post-action stage, that partnership facilitates involvement in the school and an increased understanding of the school system. There was a strong feeling at post-action that parent-school partnership has increased compared with the reported experience of earlier generations. One parent summed up this feeling when she stated:

> Before now, if your mother told you she was going to a school meeting with the teachers [you would say], 'What did I do?' My child [was pleased and interested when she learned I was coming into school and] said, 'What are you going to talk about this morning? Who's going to be there?'

Another mother said of her children, in the past, 'If they heard you were going to meet the principal they though they were going to be killed [i.e., severely

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punished].' Another was of the opinion that 'it's easier to talk to teachers now.' There was further reference, in replies to this question, about the lessening of the image of teachers as authority figures as a result of partnership, leading to greater equality between teachers and parents. Speaking of partnership, a mother stated, 'It kind of brings, don't get me wrong now [indicating that she was not in any way suggesting a demeaning of teacher's role] but it kind of brings the teachers and the mothers closer.'

5.4.4 Question 4: From your own experience, what do you feel about parent-school partnership?

Findings from Question 4 at pre-action stage are presented in Chapter Four, pp. 239-244.

Table 18: Findings from Question 4 (Pre-action and post-action)

Parental feelings about parent-school partnership, from parents' own experience	Percentage of individual parents who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase (Actual number of parents who expressed this understanding in brackets followed by total number of parents who gave views at pre-action stage)	Number of focus groups who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase followed by total number of groups who gave views at pre-action stage	Number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two who expressed this understanding at post-action phase followed by total number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two
Through partnership, parents have become involved in school activities.	13% (9/68)	0/8	10/10
Partnership has benefited their children.	10% (7/68)	0/8	10/10

Through partnership, parents were able to communicate easily with class teachers.	9% (6/68)	0/8	6/10
Through partnership, parents were able to learn about their children's progress.	7% (5/68)	0/8	10/10
Through partnership, parents were able to learn about the school system.	6% (4/68)	0/8	10/10
Partnership is lacking because there is not enough communication.	6% (4/68)	3/8	0/10
Partnership has enabled collaboration between parents and teachers.	4% 3/68)	0/8	10/10
Parents feel welcome as a result of partnership.	1% (1/68)	0/8	10/10
Parents feel respected as a result of partnership.	1% (1/68)	0/8	10/10
Partnership has made learning fun for parents and children.	1%	0/8	10/10
Parent could not be involved in partnership because of work commitments.	1%	0/8	0/10

Parents contacted by school only when problem arose.	1%	0/8	0/10
School does not encourage enough partnership.	1%	0/8	0/10
There are personal benefits for parents accruing from partnership.	0% (0/68)	2/8	8/10
Parents are always listened to in school.	0% (0/68)	2/8	10/10
Children like it when parents get involved.	0% (0/68)	2/8	10/10
Joint goal-setting takes place.	0% (0/68)	1/8	10/10
Parents are able to take part in decision-making.	0% (0/68)	0/8	10/10
Partnership results in parents getting to know each other.	0% (0/68)	0/8	10/10
Partnership results in the joint parent-teacher creation of a happy environment.	0% (0/68)	0/8	10/10

Replies to Question 4 at post-action stage showed that partnership had resulted in involvement and beneficial outcomes for the children and that there were positive outcomes in the areas of collaboration, communication and learning about the children's progress as well as the school system. Parents were able to give insights into the partnership process at post-action that had not emerged at

pre-action. One such insight involved parents getting to know other parents and the benefits accruing from this. The theme of parental support for other parents has recurred right through the findings and is a very important aspect of partnership. A parent who was involved in policy formation stated:

> Well, I think what broke it really for a lot of parents was the paired reading. Do you remember when we came in first day for paired reading and the *Maths for Fun*, I think that broke the way for a lot of us to meet other parents and then personally myself and Emer and Violet (not real names) got to know each other very well and then it started up about the policy, there was no problem whatsoever coming because we had known each other.

Another theme that constantly occurred in the replies to the questions was the theme of the great enjoyment children get from seeing the parents involved in the school. A parent stated: 'Susan (her daughter, not real name) is so excited now when I'm here and so proud it's her Mum in the class.'

The parents were conscious that they had created a happy environment. The joint creation of a school environment supportive of learning emerged as an issue to be addressed at pre-action stage. (See Table 14 above, pp. 267-269.)

One parent mentioned, in reply to Question 4, that the experience of being involved in school led to increased 'bonding' between herself and her daughter as they now had had the common experience of engaging in school activities.

5.4.5 Question 5: In general, what are the issues relating to parent-school partnership?

Findings from Question 5 at pre-action stage are presented in Chapter Four, pp. 246-249.

Table 19: Findings from Question 5 (Pre-action and post-action)

Parental understanding of issues relating to parent-school partnership in general	Percentage of individual parents who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase (Actual number of parents who expressed this understanding in brackets followed by total number of parents who gave views at pre-action stage)	Number of focus groups who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase followed by total number of groups who gave views at pre-action stage	Number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two who expressed this understanding at post-action phase followed by total number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two
Work commitments	43% (29/68)	8/8	10/10
Childcare	34% (16/68)	8/8	10/10
Lack of time	15% (10/68)	8/8	3/10
Poor parent-teacher communication	12% (8)	0/8	5/10
Unapproachable teachers	10% (7)	0/8	0/10
Personal issues	7% (5/68)	0/8	0/10
Parental attitudes	6% (4/68)	0/8	0/10
Home factors	4% (3/68)	0/8	4/10
No issues perceived	4% (3/68)	0/8	0/10
Lack of parental interest	3% (2/68)	0/8	0/10
Lack of parental confidence	1% (1/68)	0/8	10/10
Timing of involvement activities	1% (1/68)	0/8	10/10
Exclusion of parents from decision-making	1% (1/68)	0/8	0/10
Awkward parents	1% (1/68)	0/8	0/10
Lack of parking	1% (1/68)	0/8	0/10
Large families	0% (0/68)	4/8	0/10
Parent only concerned with own child	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Parent nervous of involvement	0% (0/68)	1/8	10/10

Parent's dislike of being approached by teacher	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Parent feeling guilty because of inability to be involved	0% (0/68)	1/8	6/10
Parent's lack of knowledge of how to help child	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Vagueness about homework requirements	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Lack of mutual parent/teacher trust	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Not enough parent/teacher meetings	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Inefficiency of methods of communicating partnership events	0% (0/68)	0% (0/68)	10/10
Lack of fathers involved in school events	0% (0/68)	0% (0/68)	3/10
Lack of agreed procedures when parents are involved in school activities	0% (0/68)	0% (0/68)	6/10

Many of the same and obvious issues hindering partnership were emphasised in post-action findings as had emerged at the pre-action stage, e.g., work commitments and time factors. Parents who had participated in Spirals One and Two were able to identify further issues. One issue that the parents discussed frequently as they planned for events and, again, in their responses here, was the issue of the timing of involvement events. There was a consensus amongst

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these parents that first thing in the morning was the best time for events as, later in the day, there is shopping to be done, meals to be cooked and children to be collected. A parent stated: 'They're all [i.e., the parents] down here in the morning [dropping children off]. Even if it [i.e., involvement activity] was for an hour, you'd be back home for 10 [A.M.].'

A further issue identified again and again, as the parents strove to increase parental involvement in Spirals One and Two, was the issue of communication of events. One parent said: 'I think the notes put us off.' The vagueness of invitations to, e.g., attend meetings was alluded to. Speaking of these invitations, a parent noted: 'You don't know what you're getting involved in.' Invitations issued by parents or teachers to parents was deemed to be the most efficient form of communication. As one parent put it: 'Word-of-mouth is the greatest thing ever.' Another mother considered that the school notice boards should be used to advertise events. She stated:

> Your notice board and pictures around it – something eye-catching that looks fun. Then it doesn't look as serious as people think it's going to be.

At post-action parents emphasized the fact that some parents are nervous to come into school and need encouragement to do so as well as the fact that fathers generally do not become involved. This certainly was the experience in Spirals One and Two. No father became involved in the action planning. No father was involved in the Junior Infant Fun Day, the Senior Infant Christmas art and craft day, in the planting or in policy formation. Two fathers out of a total of twenty-eight parents took part in the history walks.

A further, very practical issue pertaining to partnership was identified by the parents at post-action stage. This was the issue of clearly defined procedures when parents come to the school to take part in involvement activities, i.e., what is the exact role of the parent in the classroom? This issue will be looked at again when presenting the findings for Question 6, as it emerged as a personal issue for one of the parents.

5.4.6   Question 6:From your own experience, what are the issues relating to parent-school partnership?

Findings from Question 6 at pre-action stage are presented in Chapter Four, pp. 251-254.

Table 20: Findings from Question 6 (Pre-action and post-action)

Parental understanding of issues relating to parent-school partnership, from parents' own experience	Percentage of individual parents who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase (Actual number of parents who expressed this understanding in brackets followed by total number of parents who gave views at pre-action stage)	Number of focus groups who expressed this understanding at pre-action phase followed by total number of groups who gave views at pre-action stage	Number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two who expressed this understanding at post-action phase followed by total number of parents involved in Spirals One and Two
Work commitments	34% (23/68)	3/8	0/10
No issue	21% (14/68)	0/8	10/10
Childminding	21% (14/68)	3/8	0/10
Time available	7% (5/68)	0/8	0/10
Home factors	5% (3/68)	0/8	0/10
Lack of parental knowledge on how to help with child's education	2% (1/68)	0/8	0/10

Lack of trust between parents and teachers	2% (1/68)	0/8	0/10
Lack of parental confidence	2% (1/68)	0/8	0/10
Parent/Teacher meetings too early	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Parent/Teacher meetings too infrequent	0% (0/68)	1/8	0/10
Parent's feeling of guilt when she could not attend involvement events	0% (0/68)	0/8	1/10
Lack of agreed procedures when parents are involved in school activities	0% (0/68)	0/8	1/10

Most of the parents involved in Spirals One and Two had no issue with partnership from their personal experience. Two parents did have issues. One of these expressed a feeling of guilt at not being able to be involved in some activities. She stated:

> I know now I don't work but genuinely, some days, I might have a doctor's appointment. No one minds helping out but I hate when I have to apologize when I can't make that day. You feel that you're making excuses. [It would be better] if it was understood that we help on some days.

An issue arose for another parent around the area of procedures when taking part in involvement activities. She had experienced an uncooperative child as she worked in a classroom in an involvement activity. She corrected the child who then complained the parent to the teacher. The parent said she considered that she needed to correct the child herself rather than referring the child to the teacher and considers that procedures need to be in place for involvement activities. She said:

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I think another thing about parents being involved is parents need to know how to approach the children properly. [When a child stepped out of line] I felt like I wanted to handle it myself because if I had to go to the teacher the children wouldn't have respect for my authority again.

5.5 First and second action spirals: Summary

The first action spiral saw some Junior Infant parents progressing from planning and implementing a simple classroom activity through planning and implementing a curricular activity to engaging in curricular planning. In so doing, they were addressing issues identified at the pre-action stage and shown in Table 14 (pp. 267-269), viz., the need for increased parental involvement, the need for collaboration between parents and teachers in the creation of a school environment supportive of learning and the need for parents to be involved in decision-making. The second action spiral saw the same issues addressed. In this spiral, Second Class parents engaged in policy formation and planned and implemented a planting activity.

The first and second action spirals fulfilled the aim of the project, viz., the aim to increase parent-school partnership. What was less successful was the aim to involve parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage in the partnership. Two parents falling into the latter category were involved in the first action spiral, but were not involved in planning in that action spiral. No parents falling into the category were involved in the second action spiral. The next chapter, where case studies of some of these parents are presented, will provide some explanations as to why these parents have difficulty in becoming involved.

CHAPTER SIX: CASE STUDIES OF PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS OF CHILDREN WHO MAY BE AT RISK OF EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

6.1   Introduction

A case study approach was used in this section of the research in order to gain an in-depth view of factors influencing partnership with parents whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage. (See Chapter Three, pp. 183-184, for description of case studies.) Within the case studies there was an element of action in which it was attempted to increase the involvement of each parent in school activities. The reader is reminded of the difficulty some parents have in becoming involved with the school (e.g., Crozier 1997, McKibbin et al. 1998) and the difficulty schools have in involving parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage in parent-school partnership (e.g., Department of Education and Science 2005a, Moroney 1995). The reader is also alerted to the fact that the action involved in some cases will be miniscule but, notwithstanding, may represent an important step forward for the parents involved. It should also be noted, and this will be observed in reading the individual interview material, that all of the parents in this section of the research consider that they have a very good relationship with the school. All of the parents have frequent contact with the HSCL Coordinator, the SCP project worker and the researcher, in her role as principal, and so, it could be argued, these parents, some of whom are not involved in in-school activities, work in greater partnership with the school than many other

parents who do not fall into the category of parent whose child may be at risk of educational disadvantage.

The six parents involved in the case studies all had children in either Junior Infants or Second Class during the 2006/2007 school year. The researcher outlined the criteria for educational disadvantage as identified by the DES (Department of Education and Science 2005b) to the parents. To remind the reader, these criteria are:

      (a) children who come from a family where the main earner is unemployed

      (b) children who live in local authority housing

      (c) children of parents in receipt of medical cards

      (d) children of lone parents

      (e) children from families of five or more children

      (f) children, one of whose parents did not complete the Junior Certificate
      or an equivalent examination

All of the parents fulfilled at least three of the criteria. Each parent agreed to the inclusion of her case study in the dissertation in the section dealing with partnership with parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage.

Each parent was interviewed initially, at the start of the second term of the 2006/2007 school year, and contacted again, where necessary, if the initial information was incomplete or needed clarification. At the end of the research

period, the interviewer went through the initial responses with each parent to ensure that the latter's views had been accurately recorded by the researcher. Any adjustments or additions were made at that point. Where the adjustments or additions reflected a change in the parent's viewpoint resulting from the action undertaken during the project, this information was included in the final evaluation for each parent and not with the original information recorded. Otherwise, the adjustments or additions were included with the original material.

All of the parents involved in the case studies were invited to partake in the general action described in Chapter Five. No parent was able to participate in this general action. Three of the parents agreed to partake in an activity related to, but not part of, the general action. One parent was not able to be involved in any action in the school. A further two were not able to commit to action connected with the action research but undertook a personal development course through the HSCL Scheme during the action research period. (This personal development course was not part of the action research.)

The HSCL Coordinator played a major role in enabling the involvement, where it occurred, of the parents in this part of the research and it is doubtful if any action could have taken place without her help. Between the initial and final interviews, the researcher was in close contact with, and communicated regularly with, all of the parents both in her role as researcher and her role as principal. As a result, the

relationship between the researcher and the parents was enhanced during the research period.

The first section below will deal with the interview questions. Then, each case study will be presented under the following headings:

- Interview findings

- Parent-school partnership implemented during the project

- Evaluation of action implemented during the action research period (This will consist of an examination of parents' pre-action and post-action responses to Questions 2, 6, 10, 14a, 14b and 18, i.e., the rating questions, as well as a presentation of any comments offered by them on the subject of the action.)

6.2 <u>Interview questions</u>

The interview questions were based on Epstein's typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991) of family/school partnership. To remind the reader, the typology is as follows:

<u>Type 1</u>: *Basic obligations of families* include providing for children's health and development and the creation of a supportive home environment for children's learning.

<u>Type 2</u>: *Basic obligations of schools* include communicating with parents regarding children's progress.

Type 3:   *Involvement at school* refers to parental participation in classroom activities or attendance at school events.

Type 4:   *Involvement in learning activities at home* encompasses the area of parental help at home in activities coordinated with children's school work and includes assistance and information from school to parents on how best to provide this help.

Type 5:   *Involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy* sees parents in decision-making roles in, e.g., parents' councils and Boards of Management.

Type 6:   *Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations* includes connections with agencies, e.g., health and community services, that have responsibility or may contribute to children's education and future successes (Epstein and Dauber 1991, 290-1).

Question 1 sought information on Type 1 involvement, i.e., basic obligations of families. Questions 2 – 9 sought information on Type 2 involvement, i.e., basic obligations of schools. Questions 10-13 sought information on Types 3 and 4 involvements, i.e., the involvement of parents in learning activities at home and at school. Questions 14-17 sought information on Type 5 involvement, i.e., parental involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy. Questions 18-20 sought information on Type 6 involvement, i.e., collaboration and exchanges with community organisations.

Questions 2, 6, 10, 14a, 14b and 18 are rating questions, i.e., parents were given a choice of response. The possible responses were: very well, well, not sure, poorly, very poorly.

The interview questions are provided in Appendix XII.

6.3 <u>Case Studies</u>

In all cases, pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity. The children's class levels refer to the classes the children were in at the time of the original interview, during the 2006/2007 school year.

6.3.1   Case Study 1: Parent A

Parent A is a past pupil of St. Mary's School. She is a lone parent with one daughter. Her daughter, Alison, is in Second Class. Parent A completed second-level education herself, wants her daughter to complete second-level and could see her daughter attending third-level education. Parent A stated: 'I want her to do what she loves.'

Two years prior to the initial interview, Parent A had a very traumatic experience which has had an ongoing effect on her health and on her ability to cope. As a result, Parent A has difficulty in ensuring that her daughter attends school regularly. Because of this, Parent A has been contacted by the Education Welfare

Board (National Education Welfare Board 2008), through the Education Welfare

Officers, with regard to her daughter's poor school attendance.

6.3.1.1 <u>Interview findings</u>

Question 1:   What do you see as your responsibilities as a parent, in relation to the school, to help your child?

The following was Parent A's reply:

> School only has the child from 9 A.M. to 2.40 P.M. Basically you're there to continue – learning goes on all the time. There's the basic thing of asking your child, 'How was your day?' Being interested in school will make your child interested in school. Alison does homework, then goes out. I'm involved in the homework at the start, but I leave her off. I get involved again at the end, but I keep an eye on homework while she's doing it. You need to be interested in your child's education. Some parents just see it as avoiding arrest. That's not good enough.

Question 2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?

Parent A considers that she and the school co-operate very well to help her child.

Question 3:   What would help both us and you to co-operate more?

Parent A feels that, while letters are sent out explaining things, verbal

communication is better. It is difficult to talk to the teacher because there are so

many children in one class and teachers and parents are 'strapped for time.'

Groups of parents talking would be good, Parent A feels.

Parent A stresses the importance of the teacher in children's education and in

parent-teacher co-operation. She stated:

> Teachers have to look after the children's education but also their welfare. Both are equally important –if children aren't happy they won't learn. It

takes a special person to be a teacher dealing with young children. It's not just about education. The first years at school are very important.

Question 4: What special difficulties are there in co-operating, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent A's reply was as follows:

> Parents may not always be in the frame of mind to talk to the teacher if something is happening for them. When my child was in Senior Infants her teacher approached me because she was worried about her. I found that good. I was relieved to talk and shocked at the same time. The teacher was very understanding. Because of what was happening [in parent's life at the time], I was very guarded in talking. I'm not a person to ask for help. A lot of parents are that way.

> There may sometimes be financial difficulties. Once I had a lot of trouble getting time off for a meeting at school. I had to work extra time instead. It's much harder for lone parents though some men don't balance the scales either!

A clash of personalities could get in the way of home and school working together, in Parent A's view.

Question 5: What could be done to help co-operation between parents and school, where there is some educational disadvantage?

Parent A suggests that, if instead of one bulk payment for books, parents could pay in weekly instalments.

Question 6: How well do we and you communicate, to help your child?

Parent A considers that she and the school communicate very well to help her child.

Question 7: What could help us to communicate better?

Parent A feels that the once-a-year parent-teacher meeting, lasting just ten minutes, is inadequate. She stated:

A follow up would be good towards the end of the year. The school report is good but there's nothing better than sitting down and having a chat.

She also feels that the parent-teacher meeting is held too early in the school year, i.e., in November. Parent A considers that teachers cannot possibly be familiar with the educational progress of children in their class by the end of the first term, which is shortened by one week due to the mid-term break, and that teachers would have a better understanding of the children later in the year.

Question 8:   What special challenges are there in communication, where there may be educational disadvantage?

In Parent A's view, a challenge exists if the teacher is not approachable. She stated:

> Parents are bringing their own experience to the teacher. Some parents hated school. They bring the stigma along with them. Parents influence children to a certain degree. If parents hated school they could be ruining the experience for the child beforehand.

Question 9:   What could be done to help communication between parents and school, where there is some educational disadvantage?

The best way of helping is 'basic one-to-one communication' between parent and teacher, in Parent A's view.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

Parent A's reply to this question was 'Getting better.'

Question 11:   What could be done to help you to be more involved with the school, in helping your child?

Parent A stated:

> If the classes were smaller you could work better with the teacher to get problems sorted. When Alison was in pre-school (where numbers were smaller) she had a problem distinguishing between red and green. I was able to work with the pre-school teacher to get the problem sorted – the curriculum there was not as wide and varied.
> (In reply to question from interviewer as to how much she knew about primary school curriculum): I know she's doing basic maths, reading and writing. I'm fairly keyed in with Alison as regards this. Children sometimes don't want to talk about school. When I ask about how she got on in school, she often just says, 'Fine.'

Question 12: What special challenges are there in being involved, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent A considers that big classes are a hindrance to teachers having time to involve parents. Children nowadays grow up very fast and 'have more gadgets,' in her view. These facts make the teachers' workload more demanding. The fact that life in Ireland has become very materialistic is a challenge to being involved, in Parent A's view, as now, in many households, both parents have to work. Being a lone parent is also a challenge to being involved. Parent A stated that she does her very best to attend events at school involving her daughter, such as concerts and sacramental occasions. She stated that the child's father has not attended these events. Once, she herself could not attend an event and she stated: 'I was gutted [i.e., very upset].'

Parent A stated that some parents might be reluctant to come into the school. She said that some parents went through school themselves and finished not knowing how to spell. Speaking of involvement, she said, 'Anyone with learning difficulty would shy away, especially if they're advanced in age.'

Question 13: What could be done to help with these challenges?

Parent A holds that parents could support teachers in the classroom, thereby making more time for teachers to communicate with parents. She also referred to the *Bridging the Gap* programme which, she feels, had helped her involvement. For this programme, she had come in to partake in a writing programme with the children in her daughter's class. This, she stated, helped her to feel 'not so daunted' and connected her with her daughter's learning and with the school.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent A feels poorly consulted in relation to her child. She stated:

> This is because teachers do not have enough support in class and not enough time. When there are thirty children in a class some will suffer. As I said already, the parent-teacher meetings just once a year aren't enough and they only last ten minutes. When the report comes in the summer you can't discuss it with the teacher.

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent A considers that she is consulted very well in relation to wider school issues and that her views are very well respected.

Question 15: What should we be doing to consult with you and listen to your views, with more respect?

Parent A replied, 'I feel my views are listened to with respect.'

Question 16: What special challenges are there in consulting and listening to the views of parents, when there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent A feels that there is a challenge for the teacher in terms of the time available to him/her. In addition, 'sometimes the teacher may be standoffish.' This causes problems, in Parent A's view.

Question 17: What could be done to help with these?

The amount of time available to a teacher is out of the control of the school but, in Parent A's view, 'care should be taken when allocating classes.'

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

Parent A feels very well supported by the school. In terms of the wider community, she singled out the two Education Welfare Officers (National Education Welfare Board 2008) she has encountered for special mention, stating that she feels 'supported' by them. Parent A feels unsupported by the wider community. She referred to a time following a very traumatic experience in her life (referred to above, p. 321) when she badly needed the support of community agencies. She was not supported by them. She stated that, at that time, she had entrusted her lot to the state and had been let down by it. At the time, the only support for Parent A came from the school. Parent A stated that she did not know

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how people in difficult circumstances who do not have school-going children cope because, as she sees it, the only support for such people is from the school.

Question 19: What should the school and its wider community agencies do to give you more support?

Parent A feels very supported by the school but stated that support from the broader community agencies is difficult to access. Parent A could not work following the traumatic experience she had had, referred to above (p. 321), and stated that, because of her previous exemplary work record, found it hard to get unemployment benefit. (She was referring to the fact that, because of her previous exemplary work record, she found it difficult to persuade the relevant authorities that she now could not work and needed financial support.) She stated, 'I had to work tooth and nail for any benefit.' In circumstances such as she encountered, she feels that help from community agencies should be easy to access.

Question 20: What special needs might parents of children with some educational disadvantage have for such support?

Parent A stated that lone parents are coping on their own. Basic support like financial support for books and rent allowance would be a help, in Parent A's view. Parent A feels that parents of children with some educational disadvantage may need special support from the workplace. She stated: 'The Irish workplace is supposed to have become tolerant but still has ways of putting on pressure.' She referred to a time when she needed to do shift work in order to accommodate her caring for her daughter and found it difficult to get this, in spite of an exemplary work record with the company for which she was working.

6.3.1.2   Parent-school partnership implemented during the project

Prior to the action research project, Parent A had taken part in the *Bridging the Gap* literacy project in St. Mary's School.

As Parent A was attending two courses during the action research period, she was unable to attend involvement events. One of these courses was not connected to the school; the other was a personal development course in the school, organized through the HSCL Scheme. Parent A was in frequent communication with the researcher (in her role as principal) and the HSCL Coordinator during the research period and the school made every effort to support Parent A, who suffers from health problems as an outcome of the traumatic experience, referred to earlier (p. 321), in her efforts to improve her daughter's attendance. This support took the form of the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher, in her role as principal, being available to talk to Parent A when necessary. The school, the Education Welfare Officer and Parent A worked in partnership towards ensuring a good school attendance for Parent A's daughter. In addition, the HSCL Coordinator helped Parent A to receive support from a community agency.

6.3.1.3   Evaluation of action implemented during the action research period

Question 2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?

Parent A replied 'Very well' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 6: How well do we and you communicate to help your child?

Parent A replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

Parent A stated at the initial interview that her involvement with the school was 'getting better' and at the end of the action research period she stated that her involvement was 'a lot better.' When asked to elaborate, Parent A said:

> What Alison missed in school, I should be in court but, with your help and the help of both Education Welfare Officers, I wasn't. [This refers to the fact that parents can be prosecuted, under the Education Welfare Act, 2000, for their children's poor school attendance.] We were able to work around it all. I did the personal development programme and that geared me up to go into the community support programme. You supported Alison bigtime. I know she's safe in school. You don't know how hard it is for parents to let their child go. The support meant the world to me and has helped me bond back with my family. The school was the only outside connection I had and it was positive. [When I was going through a rough time] it was a very big, uphill struggle and I had no support from any other agency. I couldn't work and I couldn't function. Knowing that there's someone out there rooting for you makes all the difference. My child is my world and school is a monumental part of her life for thirteen years. If you don't know the people around your child, you should get to know them. You might think you're here going through the motions but you're on the corridor talking to parents and children. You're a very hands-on principal. It's a lot easier for parents to come and talk to you if they know you.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

At the initial interview, Parent A stated that she was consulted poorly in relation to her own child. This is because, in Parent A's view, teachers do not have enough time to talk with parents and because parent-teacher meetings are held too early in the school year. Parent A stated that there had been an improvement in the timing

of the parent-teacher meeting in the current school year as it was held in Term Three. (Note that parent-teacher meetings for the school in general were held in December. Parent-teacher meetings for Parent A's child's class were held in Term Three because of personnel factors.) Parent A stated at the final interview that she is still poorly consulted in relation to her child, because of the lack of time available to teachers for consultation.

Question 14b:How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent A replied, 'Very well,' at initial and final interviews.

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

At both initial and final interviews, Parent A felt very well supported by the school but poorly supported by wider community agencies.

6.3.2   Case Study 2: Parent B

Parent B is a past pupil of St. Mary's School. She is a lone parent with four daughters aged 8-14. The two younger ones are in primary school, one in Second Class and one in Third Class. The two older girls are in secondary school and will take their Leaving Certificate examination in 2009. Parent B left school after the Intermediate Certificate at age sixteen. Parent B would like to resume her education, if she could. Parent B's youngest daughter, who is in Second Class, has a chronic health condition which requires constant care and attention from Parent B.

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6.3.2.1 <u>Interview findings</u>

Question 1:   What do you see as your responsibilities as a parent, in relation to the school, to help your child?

Parent B replied:

> Basically trying to get them here and listening to the teachers. I help with homework. With the two smallies [i.e., younger children], you look at their journal. With the older ones, it's harder.

Question 2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?

Parent B considers that she and the school co-operate very well to help her children.

Question 3:   What would help both us and you to co-operate more?

Parent B feels that co-operation is very good at present. She suggests that the school should have a rule stating that children should only be allowed to bring basic writing/colouring materials to use in school. Many children have 'fancy' and expensive materials and there is a pressure on parents to supply these materials. Parent B considers that children can be hurtful to each other and that children have said to her children, 'My mam has money, yours is poor.'

Parent B considers that teachers play a large role in promoting co-operation and mentioned that to praise the children has beneficial outcomes. Parent B's youngest daughter had a teacher who was very encouraging to the child. In turn, Parent B was encouraged when the child came home and said, 'Mam, I got excellent – the

best in the class.' Speaking of her youngest daughter, Parent B said: 'She got so much from it, like. I think it's given her a great buzz, to be honest with you.'

Question 4:   What special difficulties are there in co-operating, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent B cited financial difficulties and elaborated on this in reply to Question 5, below.

Question 5:   What could be done to help co-operation between parents and school, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent B replied as follows:

> Prices are outrageous. The school has helped me with my girls with their books, but as for uniforms, it's scandalous. It puts an awful lot of strain on me. In the secondary school, their uniform alone could amount to €1,000. It's not just me, granted I'm low-paid, but there's people out there that are working that can't afford it either. The books in the primary are all workbooks, it's crazy you can't pass them on. It adds to the expense, whereas if you could pass them on … It's dead money. It's brilliant they get lunches in primary school.

Parent B stated that her income is approximately €300 per week and she and her four children must survive on this. Parent B gets a children's allowance from the State but that is used to buy clothing. Parent B tries to supplement her income. She stated: 'I scrimp and scrounge. I do people's ironing and I do people's books. I do anything. I run around for people. I just don't have the choice.'

Question 6:   How well do we and you communicate, to help your child?

Parent B feels that she and the school communicate very well to help her children.

Question 7:   What could help us to communicate better?

While 'the letters basically tell us everything' Parent B considers that written communication can be problematic in that 'the kids just put them [i.e. letters] in

their bag and that's it!' This form of communication depends on whether the children remember to pass on the letters. Therefore, an alternative form of communication should be considered, in Parent B's view. As regards communication, Parent B feels that a lot depends on the teacher. She gave an example of a teacher who communicated very well with her. When one of Parent B's daughters had problems at senior primary level, her teacher phoned Parent B every week to keep her informed and, in this way, teacher and parent worked together to help the child.

Question 8:   What special challenges are there in communication, where there may be educational disadvantage?

Parent B sees no special challenge in communicating where there may be educational disadvantage.

Question 9:   What could be done to help communication between parents and school, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent B does not see the need to improve communication but sees a need to improve on the method of communicating via letters sent home through children.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

Parent B considers that she is well involved with the school in that she has an excellent relationship with the school and communicates regularly as regards the children's needs and progress. However, Parent B has a sick child and therefore cannot commit to being involved in the school. Parent B has to take the child for frequent appointments in one hospital and has to collect supplies for the child from

another. These duties, in addition to the fact that she is the sole breadwinner, mean that Parent B is not able to commit to school involvement activities. Parent B helps her children with homework but stated that there are difficulties in this regard. She stated:

> Homework has changed since I was at school. I have most difficulty with the Irish. Natalie would need to write her homework down properly. It takes me about an hour to get it out of her [what she has to do].

In reply to the interviewer asking if there was anything we could do in the school to help, Parent B stated: 'You've done all you can, it's just Natalie. She has to pay more attention to the board [i.e., blackboard].' Parent B suggested that a homework club in the school, where the children would be helped with their homework 'would be fantastic.' Parent B has never missed a school event, e.g., concert or drama, in which her children took part.

Question 11: What could be done to help you to be more involved with the school, in helping your child?

Parent B feels that, if there was more support for carers (i.e., of sick children), she could be more involved in school activities. (See also reply to next question.)

Question 12: What special challenges are there in being involved, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent B sees financial difficulties as the main challenge to being involved. As a lone parent, she is the sole breadwinner, has low-paid employment and must work as much as she can. This precludes her from being involved. She stated: 'They give you a rise and in two days you have a letter from the Corporation. Your rent is

gone up. They're giving it and taking it.' (This refers to the fact that, when she gets an increase in her pay, the rent which she pays for her local authority accommodation is often increased soon afterwards.) Parent B feels that the Irish school system compares unfavourably with its English counterpart in terms of financial support.

> You go to England and there's everything supplied. There's hot dinners supplied. My kids don't seem to be getting free education. My cousins were home from England. They could not believe the amount I have to pay for the girls to go to school. It's not free education – not at all.

Question 13: What could be done to help with these challenges?

Parent B replied:

> I think the school system is wrong because they're putting too much responsibility on the parents and on the teachers. Books should be in the school. Dinners should be supplied by the government.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent B stated, 'Very well. You always ask me for my views.'

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent B considers she's very well consulted for her views and that her views are very well respected.

Question 15: What should we be doing to consult with you and listen to your views, with more respect?

Parent B stated:

You always ask for my views. I'm asked for my opinion and we work together. The teachers listen to me. It's very personal in the primary school.

Question 16: What special challenges are there in consulting and listening to the views of parents, when there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent B sees no challenge.

Question 17: What could be done to help with these?

(Not applicable)

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

Parent B feels very well supported by the school and the School Completion Programme (Chapter One, 16-18) but poorly supported by the school's wider community links. She stated:

> The community does nothing for the kids, nothing. We've tried to arrange things ourselves but it all comes down to insurance and money. To give them an extra-curricular [activity] it's money, money, money. For them to go to youth clubs on two nights, it's €16 for four because it's €2 a night The parks, you can't go up there because there's children up there, that's what I call them, they're only children, drinking. My kids have nothing. The only extra ... what I find brilliant is the set-up ye have here (i.e., School Completion Programme activities) ... the soccer on a Thursday, that's the only break they get. When they break up on holidays they go [to holiday activities provided by SCP] ... that's the only break they get.

Question 19: What should the school and its wider community agencies do to give you more support?

Parent B feels that there should be something arranged in the community for the children, especially something that would teach them how to interact with each other. Parent B mentioned the desirability of putting activities in place such as a

community disco for the older children because, at the moment, 'there's nothing there without costing a fortune' and, in her view, there are plenty of venues for these events.

Question 20: What special needs might parents of children with some educational disadvantage have for such support?

Parents have not got the resources themselves to provide extra-curricular activities, in Parent B's view.

6.3.2.2 <u>Partnership implemented during the project</u>

Prior to the action research period, Parent B had not been involved in school activities.

Parent B was not able to commit to a partnership activity during the course of the project, due to her commitments to her sick child. She said, 'I can't commit to doing things and let people down. It's horrible to let people down.' Parent B feels badly about not being involved. She stated: 'The kids say, "Mam, you weren't there, you weren't there" and it's very, very hard.' The researcher reminded her of all the care she gives to her children and suggested she might say a word of congratulations to herself for that. She replied, 'It's very hard to say.'

6.3.2.3 <u>Evaluation of action implemented during the action research period</u>

Question 2: **How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?**

Parent B felt that she and the school co-operate very well at both initial and final interviews.

Question 6: How well do we and you communicate to help your child?

At both initial and final interviews, Parent B considered that she and the school communicate very well to help her child.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

At the initial interview, Parent B stated that she was well involved with the school to help her child.

As stated, Parent B was not able to be involved in a partnership activity. She did, however undertake a personal development course in the school through the HSCL Scheme. Parent B said that it helped that it was held in the school and on a day that suited her. Speaking of this course, she stated:

> I loved that. It was a brilliant course. It was absolutely fantastic. It opened up an awful lot of people and you got to meet new people which was great. I'm usually only talking to the dog. It showed us the opportunities that are out there. I'd recommend it. [The course] was what gave me the interest to go back to school.

At the final interview, Parent B stated that she was well involved with the school to help her child. No increase in involvement during the action research period was noted by Parent B.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them, in relation to your child?

At both initial and final interviews, Parent B stated that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to her child and that these views are very well respected.

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them, in relation to wider school issues?

At both initial and final interviews, Parent B stated that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to wider school issues and that these views are very well respected.

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links do you feel?

At both initial and final interviews, Parent B felt very well supported by the school and poorly supported by its wider community links.

6.3.3   Case Study 3: Parent C

Parent C is a past pupil of St. Mary's School. Parent C has two daughters. The elder one is in third level education, the younger is in Second Class. Parent C was single when she had her elder daughter and was a lone parent. She is now married. Parent C left school herself at age 15, having completed Second Year in Secondary School. She feels that education is 'paramount,' but is not something she 'pushes' on her children. She sees education as 'a gateway to a good future.' Speaking of her elder daughter, who is now in college, Parent C says that she did not 'cram education down her throat' but invited her to come in and see where she herself

works for a minimum wage. Her daughter said, 'I would never work in a place like this, never.' Parent C said she likes her work and is proud of what she does.

Parent C advised her daughter to get a good education and said, 'If you get a good education, you'll get a good job.' Parent C is now proud of the fact that her daughter is at third-level but also surprised. She says. 'I sometimes pinch myself and say, "My girl is going to college!" I'm really proud of the way she turned out.'

6.3.3.1 <u>Interview findings</u>

Question 1:   What do you see as your responsibilities as parents, in relation to the school, to help you child?

Parent C feels that 'every aspect' of her child's schooling is her responsibility, including making sure that the child has everything she needs for school, overseeing her child's homework and 'making sure she does it herself.' She believes that it is important 'to explain things individually' as 'children need one-to-one.'

Question 2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?

Parent C considers that she and the school co-operate very well to help her child.

Question 3:   What would help both us and you to co-operate more?

Parent C feels that time is an issue and that when she is working she does not have time to come in to take part in activities.   She also holds that co-operation is very good as it stands. She stated:

> A lot depends on the teacher. With my older child, the last two teachers the child had insisted that the child could do more because she had potential. They worked with me to ensure that the child did her best.

Question 4:   What special difficulties are there in co-operating, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent C cites working, illness and stress as possible difficulties, stating that 'some people can only deal with one thing at a time.' She believes that co-operation is more difficult for lone parents. Parent C can see the difference that having two parents makes as she herself was a lone parent when her elder daughter was at primary school and she had to go out to work to support her daughter and herself.

Question 5:   What could be done to help co-operation between parents and school, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent C contends that putting on courses for parents is helpful. She stated:

> The courses run in the school for parents are fabulous. They are running both during the day and at night to facilitate parents.

Question 6:   How well do we and you communicate, to help your child?

Parent C feels that she and the school communicate very well to help her child. She noted the change in children's relationships with teachers nowadays, compared with the past, and said, 'When I was going to school myself I was just afraid of the teachers.'

Question 7:   What could help us to communicate better?

In Parent C's view communication is very good as it stands.

Question 8: What special challenges are there in communication, where there may be educational disadvantage?

Parent C holds that there may be challenges if the teacher is 'severe.' She stated: 'If the child is defiant, if the parent and teacher can't talk it through, that would be a problem.'

Question 9: What could be done to help communication between parents and school, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent C sees a difficulty in that, in some cases, there may be no way of bringing about an improvement. If, for instance, there is a difficulty with a child's behaviour at school and the child is rebelling against certain teachers, communication between parent and teachers to bring about a solution may be impossible.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

Parent C's reply to this question was, 'As well as possible.' She feels that, if a parent wants to help her child, then the parent needs to be involved and know what's affecting the child in school.

Question 11: What could be done to help you to be more involved with the school, in helping your child?

Parent C does not see a need for more to be done as 'much is being done already.' She repeated her opinion that 'classes for parents are a great idea.' 'I think the school is great and I'm very much involved,' she said. She said her child loves school, loves the teacher and loves the activities in school and gives her an account

each evening of what went on in school that day. When her child is at home sick, Parent C gives her homework.

Question 12: What special challenges are there in being involved, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent C sees extra children at home, younger children and the stresses of life as challenges. She stated:

> When a Mum has three or four children … I don't know how they do it. I'm not surprised children go off the rails.

If there are stresses at home, a child might retaliate and misbehave as 'she is not getting the attention she should be getting.' Parent C spoke of the difficulty she had with being involved when her elder daughter was in school and she was a lone parent. She said, 'I was always too tired for her.' In order to support herself and her child, she had no choice but to work from 9 A.M. to 1.30 P.M. and from 8 P.M. to 1.30 A.M. Parent C was unemployed in recent years also and spoke of that time as being 'a great learning curve' for her children, saying 'you can't give them what you haven't got.' She feels that children nowadays have a lot of material goods but 'you have to teach them the right values.'

Question 13: What could be done to help with these challenges?

Parent C believes that joining the classes provided by the school for parents could help, stating that 'if you join, you find you're not on your own.'

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent C considers that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to her child and that her views are very well respected.

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent C considers that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to wider school issues and that her views are very well respected.

Question 15: What should we be doing to consult with you and listen to your views, with more respect?

Parent C feels her views are listened to with respect.

Question 16: What special challenges are there in consulting and listening to the views of parents, when there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent C does not see challenges here.

Question 17: What could be done to help with these?

(Not applicable)

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

Parent C feels very well supported by both the school and the wider community. She gives special mention to the Community Centre and the Youth Club as sources of support.

Question 19: What should the school and its wider community agencies do to give you more support?

(Not applicable)

Question 20: What special needs might parents of children with some educational disadvantage have for such support?

If families are big or if there are financial or other stresses in peoples' lives, then community support is important, in Parent C's view.

6.3.3.2 <u>Parent-school partnership implemented during project</u>

Prior to and during the project, Parent C has been involved in her daughter's classroom in *Maths for Fun.* Parent C and her husband came in to the school to do paired reading (not as part of action research).

As part of the action research project, Parent C and her husband took part in an art activity in the school. This art activity was organised by the HSCL Coordinator and the researcher and was an add-on activity to the history walk organised by parents as part of the main action spirals. (See Chapter Five). For the art activity, ten children, assisted where possible by their parents, and, under the direction of an artist employed by the school, painted pictures of local historical buildings on canvasses. The finished pictures were shown at a school art exhibition and then became part of a display to celebrate the history walks described in Chapter Five.

6.3.3.3 <u>Evaluation of partnership implemented during project</u>

Question 2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?

Parent C's reply to this question at both the initial and final interview was, 'Very well.'

Question 6: How well do we and you communicate to help your child?

Parent C's reply was, 'Very well,' both at the initial and final interview.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

Parent C replied that she was involved as well as possible at both interviews. Parent C did not consider that there was an increase in her level of involvement during the action research period as she continues to be involved as well as she possibly can. Parent C stated that she and her husband had enjoyed taking part in the art activity and expressed admiration for the finished paintings.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent C replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent C replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

Parent C felt very well supported by both the school and the wider community links at both initial and final interviews. At the final interview, Parent C expressed the view that one has to know what is on offer in the community to avail of it.

6.3.4   Case Study 4: Parent D

Parent D is a past pupil of St. Mary's School. She is a lone parent with four children. Her eldest child, a girl, is in 4th Class. She has a daughter in Junior Infants and two younger boys, one aged two years and one a few months old. Parent D left school after she had taken the Intermediate Certificate examination, aged sixteen. She said that when she was at school her mother had to go out to work and that she and her siblings had to do a lot of housework.

Speaking of her elder daughter, Parent D stated:

> Sabrina wants to be a teacher or a beautician. I hope her life will turn out to be totally different from mine. There's more for children now, more to avail of. I'd love her to go the whole way to Leaving Certificate and make something of herself. I left school after Inter Cert. I'd never press my child but I want her to go the whole way and take a different path to mine. I'll try my best to help her stay in school to Leaving Cert. I wouldn't like her to come in with a baby. She's very bright but she can be very cheeky. She has her good points. She's very interested in art and poetry.

6.3.4.1 <u>Interview findings</u>

Question 1:   What do you see as your responsibilities as parents, in relation to the school, to help you child?

Parent D sees to it that her children get to school. If she cannot bring them herself, she asks a neighbour to bring them. Parent D ensures that the children get to holiday activities organized through the School Completion Programme.

Speaking of her elder daughter, Parent D stated:

> I want her to get on. I do my best but time is another issue. I don't have that time. If there was homework classes it would bring her along fine.

Question 2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?

Parent D considers that she and the school co-operate very well to help her child.

Question 3:   What would help both us and you to co-operate more?

Parent D stated:

> I find it very hard to do the homework with the girls. Sabrina can't concentrate on her homework. The telly could be on or Baby Tom could be up and down the stairs. I'd love homework classes for Sabrina after school. There should be facilities for them. I can't afford after-school activities.

Question 4:   What special difficulties are there in co-operating, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent D cites lack of time as a difficulty as well as 'competition between children.' Parent D feels that there is a lot of pressure on parents to provide expensive pencils, markers, pencil cases and other colouring materials for children and stated: 'I can't afford some of the things for Sabrina that other children have. Things are dear enough, quite expensive, especially since the euro money came in.'

Question 5:   What could be done to help co-operation between parents and school, where there may be educational disadvantage?

Parent D replied to this question as follows:

> A fund should be set up. My mother sent two of my brothers to St. Matthew's School [not real name] because everything was free. They should have a hot lunch. In all the schools in England everything is free. I'd love Sabrina to be joined in things but I can't afford to give her the money.

Question 6:   How well do we and you communicate, to help your child?

Parent D considers that she and the school communicate very well to help her children. Speaking of communication, she said, 'It's perfect.'

Question 7:   What could help us to communicate better?

Parent D does not consider that communication needs to be improved.

Question 8:   What special challenges are there in communication, where there may be educational disadvantage?

Parent D stated: 'I don't have problems. I enquire about the girls from the teacher every week.'

Question 9:   What could be done to help communication between parents and school, where there is some educational disadvantage?

Parent D does not see a need to improve on present practices.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

Parent D feels well involved with the school. She mostly cannot come to involvement activities in the school because of her childminding commitments. She stated: 'I'm worn out over the kids, rearing them on my own.' Parent D comes to all of the school events (e.g., concerts, plays) in which her children are involved.

Question 11: What could be done to help you to be more involved with the school, in helping your child?

Parent D would enjoy coming into the school if her childminding duties permitted. She said, 'There would be no problem. I'd enjoy getting out for an hour or two.'

Parent D stated that some parents are 'shy' about coming into school and that it would help if they could come with another parent whom they knew.

Question 12: What special challenges are there in being involved, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent D replied:

> Doing homework. I have to make dinners and feed the babies. I try to blame myself but I know I am not to blame.

Question 13: What could be done to help with these challenges?

Parent D sees the main challenge (i.e., childminding) as being outside of the school domain but with regard to another challenge, her difficulty in providing a quiet space for homework, she feels that the school could help by putting a homework club, where the children would be helped with homework, in place.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent D considers that she is very well consulted by the school in relation to her child and that her views are very well respected.

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent D considers that she is very well consulted by the school in relation to wider school issues and that her views are very well respected.

Question 15: What should we be doing to consult with you and listen to your views, with more respect?

Parent D does not see a need for improvement here.

Question 16: What special challenges are there in consulting and listening to the views of parents, when there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent D sees no challenge.

Question 17: What could be done to help with these?

(Not applicable)

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

Parent D feels very well supported by the school but poorly supported by the wider community.

Question 19: What should the school and its wider community agencies do to give you more support?

Parent D says that 'there are halls everywhere' and that these should be used to provide after-school activities for children. These activities are not available near to where Parent D lives and she is afraid to allow her daughter to walk a distance to where activities are provided as 'it's an awful world' and there is a lot of violence in the locality. In any case, she finds the activities too expensive, stating that a session in the swimming pool costs €3.80 for a child. The summer holidays are a particular problem, in the sense of keeping children occupied. She said, 'There is no way of getting them anywhere. They need activities. There are too many kids on the terrace [i.e., where she lives]. They're too idle.'

Question 20: What special needs might parents of children with some educational disadvantage have for such support?

Parent D replied:

Money, time and resources. Also, Sabrina doesn't have children of her own age around. She has friends in school but basically nothing after school. I'm mostly very busy and very tired with the babies. I mostly have patience but at times I don't. It's hard for lone parents. There are a lot of lone parents out there. It's especially hard coming up to the holidays.

6.3.4.2 <u>Parent-school partnership implemented during action research</u>

Parent D attended two school involvement activities during the course of the project, one connected with the project and one unconnected. The unconnected activity involved Parent D coming in to the school for an art activity organized in the school by an outside agency. This activity involved parents and children working together on an art project. Parent D made a special effort to come in to this activity because her daughter loves art. Parent D also came to the art activity connected with the project in which children, with parental involvement, painted canvasses of local historical buildings.

6.3.4.3 <u>Evaluation of partnership implemented during project</u>

Question 2: **How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?**

Parent D replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 6: **How well do we and you communicate to help your child?**

Parent D replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 10: **How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?**

Parent D considered herself well involved at both initial and final interviews. Parent D said she comes in to ask about the children's progress every week. When

asked about the parental involvement activity connected with the project, she stated, 'I found that brilliant.' She said the children's aunt wished to buy the painting from the school for Parent D's own mother and father because it would be 'memories' for them. She stated that she would get it back in years to come, that it would be precious.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent D felt at both initial and final interviews that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to her child and that her views are very well respected.

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent D felt at both initial and final interviews that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to wider school issues and that her views are very well respected.

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

Parent D felt very well supported by the school but poorly supported by the wider community at both initial and final interviews.

6.3.5   Case Study 5: Parent E

Parent E is not a past pupil of St. Mary's School but went to school in a neighbouring school. Parent E lives with her husband and three children. She has a thirteen year-old son in a neighbouring school and two children in St. Mary's, a

daughter in Second Class and a son in Senior Infants. Parent E's father died when she was eleven and her mother died when she was sixteen. Parent E left school then to work to support the family. Parent E would like her children to stay in school to Leaving Certificate. If her son would like to leave school at sixteen to do an apprenticeship she would agree but would not like him to drop out for no reason. She does not know if the children will go to college. She would not see it as a big possibility. It would be a 'shock' if the boys went but not her daughter. During the course of the action research project, a traumatic event occurred in Parent E's family which caused stress, pain and disruption to family life.

6.3.5.1 Interview findings

Question 1:   What do you see as your responsibilities as a parent, in relation to the school, to help your child?

Parent E considers that she must make sure the children are in school on time. She sees her other responsibilities as helping the children with homework, getting the children involved in extra-curricular activities, e.g., art, helping them get used to school and helping them to get more confidence.

Question 2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?

Parent E considers that she and the school co-operate very well to help her children.

Question 3:   What would help both us and you to co-operate more?

Parent E feels that we co-operate very well as it is.

Question 4: What special difficulties are there in co-operating, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent E stated: 'If one child is sick, I can be all up in a heap. I could wrap the sick child up if he wasn't too bad, but I have no car.' Parent E said she cannot bring her other children to school if one child is sick.

Question 5: What could be done to help co-operation between parents and school, where there is some educational disadvantage?

In Parent E's view, 'it helps if you know it's all right to sometimes bring your child in late.'

Question 6: How well do we and you communicate, to help your child?

Parent E feels that she and the school communicate very well to help her children. She stated:

> I feel I can come and talk to the teachers at any time. Kyle has made great progress with the Learning Support Teacher. She is really getting him into reading. I found that programme that she took up brilliant. He didn't want to go at the beginning. He used to be very shy. He is out of himself now. He loves school now. He didn't want to go at the beginning. The teachers brought him out of himself. He wouldn't read a book before. He now even takes up [his sister] Sarah's books at home and though he can't read them he is interested in the pictures.

Question 7: What could help us to communicate better?

Parent E says she finds communication easy and always asks the teachers how the children are getting on.

Question 8:   What special challenges are there in communication, where there may be educational disadvantage?

There are none, in Parent E's view. (Note to reader: See the answer to Question10 below.)

Question 9:   What could be done to help communication between parents and school, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent E considers that communication is very good as it stands.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

Though Parent E feels that she is well involved with the school, she stated: 'I wasn't down to help out – I never got asked.' When the interviewer said that letters of invitation were sent for parents to participate in the *Bridging the Gap* literacy project, Parent E made the point that letters get lost, that 'you read them and forget them' and that being asked in person is much better.

Question 11: What could be done to help you to be more involved with the school, in helping your child?

To this, Parent E replied: 'Being asked in person.'

Question 12: What special challenges are there in being involved, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent E said that some parents have a lot of worries, stresses and sadness in their lives that prevent them from being involved. She stated, 'Parents can have a tough time.'

Question 13: What could be done to help with these challenges?

In Parent E's view, it would help if schools knew about the difficulties some parents have.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent E feels that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to her child and that her views are very well respected.

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent E feels that she is consulted very well regarding wider school issues and that her views are very well respected.

Question 15: What should we be doing to consult with you and listen to your views, with more respect?

 (Not applicable)

Question 16: What special challenges are there in consulting and listening to the views of parents, when there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent E sees no challenges.

Question 17: What could be done to help with these?

(Not applicable)

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

Parent E is of the view that the school organizes enough extra-curricular activities and that she does not need the support of the wider community. Parent E considers

that extra-curricular activities are essential for children and that her children avail of after-school art and drama activities in school (i.e., lessons, for which parents must pay, provided on a private business basis in school after school hours by art and drama teachers) and after-school soccer (provided free by the School Completion Programme).

Question 19: What should the school and its wider community agencies do to give you more support?

Parent E does not see the need for more support.

Question 20: What special needs might parents of children with some educational disadvantage have for such support?

In Parent E's view, parents need to be supported so that their problems are known, leading to greater understanding for parents.

6.3.5.2 <u>Partnership implemented during project</u>

Parent E did not attend any involvement activity prior to the action research project. Parent E was not able to attend any partnership activity during the project due to the fact that she was going through a very traumatic and painful time. (See p. 355.)

6.3.5.3 <u>Evaluation of partnership implemented during project</u>

Question 2: **How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?**

Parent E replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 6: **How well do we and you communicate to help your child?**

Parent E replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 10: **How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?**

Parent E replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews. Although Parent E did not attend an involvement activity, she feels very well involved with the school because she comes in frequently to ask about the children's progress.

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent E felt at both initial and final interviews that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to her child and that her views are very well respected.

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent E felt at both initial and final interviews that she is very well consulted for her views in relation to wider school issues and that her views are very well respected.

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

At both initial and final interviews, Parent E felt very well supported by the school and felt she did not need the support of the wider community.

6.3.6 Case Study 6: Parent F

Parent F is not a past pupil of St. Mary's School. She grew up on the south side of Cork City. Parent F lives with her husband and five children, aged 5-16. The eldest two are at second-level school and the three youngest are in primary school. The two youngest are in St. Mary's, a boy in Junior Infants and a girl in Second Class.

Parent F was the second eldest of a family of six and left school at fourteen (before her Intermediate Certificate) to stay at home when her mother got sick. Parent F got a job at fifteen and for this earned £41 per week which, she said, 'was a lot of money that time.' Regarding her own schooling, Parent F said:

> We [i.e., she and her siblings] didn't have books. Half the days I didn't have a uniform. More of the girls had everything. I just didn't like school. I thought school wasn't important and then it wasn't until I had my own children that I realised how important it is.

Parent F's eldest child will be completing his Leaving Certificate in 2008 and Parent F hopes he will get an apprenticeship straight away. Parent F stated that her second child, a fourteen year-old girl, has ability but 'just couldn't be bothered about school' and is not bothered whether she will pass or fail her Junior Certificate examination. Parent F said that this daughter will have to complete her Leaving Certificate, that 'she has no other choice.' Parent F said that if she mentions going to college to her children 'they just start laughing.' Parent F said that she herself did not get an opportunity to complete her education and she says to her elder daughter, 'Don't end up like me.' Parent F said that she knows her children do not take alcohol and does not think they smoke cigarettes. She said,

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'Everyone tries things. I know young ones of twelve and thirteen and they're taking drugs.'

6.3.6.1 <u>Interview findings</u>

Question 1:   What do you see as your responsibilities as parents, in relation to the school, to help you child?

Parent F considers that her responsibilities are to give her children lunches and make sure they get enough sleep, to drop them to and collect them from school, to make sure that they bring their books to and from school and that they have their homework done, to make sure they respect others and respect teachers and to make sure that they do not take anything that does not belong to them.

Question2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?

Parent F said that she and the school co-operate very well to help her children.

Question 3:   What would help both us and you to co-operate more?

Parent F considers that co-operation is very good as it stands. She is pleased with how her children are getting on in St. Mary's. Both of the children attending St. Mary's love school. She feared that when her youngest started school the previous September that he would find it difficult because 'he only lasted three weeks in nursery school.' She said:

> Now I can see a big difference in him … his letters, his words, his speech. He hasn't a bother getting up in the morning and going off into school. I thought he'd be the same as he was in nursery and he'd break my heart.

Question 4:   What special difficulties are there in co-operating, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

The only difficulty Parent F sees is a financial difficulty but this is a major difficulty. Parent F finds the time when the children are going back to school in September very hard. She finds it difficult to clothe and provide books for five children. She also finds providing lunches for her children expensive. While St. Mary's provides lunches, her daughter is 'fussy' and will not eat the school lunch. Parent F cites an example of another school in the locality which, she said, is 'fantastic' as the children get their breakfast and dinner there and where classes are smaller. (Note that this other school is in Urban Band 1 of the DES SSP and receives more resources than St. Mary's. See Chapter One, pp. 13-14.)

Parent F stated: 'Your school is very good. You're doing a lot for me.'

Question 5:   What could be done to help co-operation between parents and school, where there is some educational disadvantage?

Apart from financial help, Parent F does not consider that anything more needs to be done.

Question 6:   How well do we and you communicate, to help your child?

Parent F considers that she and the school communicate very well to help her children.

Question 7:   What could help us to communicate better?

Parent F considers that 'there's communication there all the time' and 'anytime there was ever anything you get a phone call.' Parent F considers that good communication between parent and teacher is the solution to addressing problems

children may have in school. She cited a time that her middle son (in another primary school) was in trouble. She said:

> He gave the teacher hell for two weeks and she kept writing to me and I'd write to her, do you know, communication every day and he knew that then and he started to settle down.

Question 8:   What special challenges are there in communication, where there may be educational disadvantage?

Parent F does not see challenges.

Question 9:   What could be done to help communication between parents and school, where there is some educational disadvantage?

Parent F feels communication is good enough as it stands.

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?

Parent F replied:

> [The school runs] courses and stuff. I don't get involved. I'm not very good at mixing with people. I don't think myself I have much involvement. Concerts and stuff, I go to them.

Parent F has five children in four different schools and said she finds it takes a great deal of time to drive the children to and from the schools. This precludes Parent F from being involved in school activities. She thus feels she is poorly involved.

Question 11: What could be done to help you to be more involved with the school, in helping your child?

Parent F replied that perhaps she could get involved in a short involvement activity. She said that she is 'forever' being invited to attend involvement events but she has no time.

Question 12: What special challenges are there in being involved, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent F stated that she had 'no confidence.' In addition, Parent F has five children in four different schools and cannot attend involvement events for all of them. She feels that if she was involved for one or two, the others would feel excluded.

Question 13: What could be done to help with these challenges?

Parent F said she might feel more confident being involved if she knew another parent attending.

Question 14a:How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?

Parent F considers that she is very well consulted for her views and that her views are very well respected. She said, 'Any time I ever had a problem, the teacher would listen to you.'

Question 14b:How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?

Parent F replied, 'Very well,' to this question.

Question 15: What should we be doing to consult with you and listen to your views, with more respect?

 (Not applicable)

Question 16: What special challenges are there in consulting and listening to the views of parents, when there may be some educational disadvantage?

Parent F sees no challenges.

Question 17: What could be done to help with these?

(Not applicable)

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?

Parent F feels very well supported by the school but poorly supported by its wider community links. She stated:

> The baths [i.e., swimming pool] cost €3.20 and if you have two or three children going there that's €10. The soccer pitch is €2 each for the boys. There are 100 children in 30 houses in [the housing development where she lives] and there's nothing for them to do. There are gangs up to no good. It's very hard and dangerous.

Question 19: What should the school and its wider community agencies do to give you more support?

Parent F feels very well supported by the school. She praised the School Completion Programme for providing after-school soccer and holiday activities for the children but sees a need for leisure activities to be provided by the community.

Question 20: What special needs might parents of children with some educational disadvantage have for such support?

Parents may have financial difficulties, in Parent F's view, and so need help in providing their children with extra-curricular leisure activities.

6.3.6.2 <u>Partnership implemented during project</u>

Parent F did not attend any involvement activity prior to the action research project. Parent F attended an art activity connected to the project in which children, with parental involvement, painted canvasses of local historical buildings.

6.3.6.3 <u>Evaluation of partnership implemented during project</u>

Question 2: **How well do we and you co-operate to help your child?**

Parent F replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 6: **How well do we and you communicate to help your child?**

Parent F replied, 'Very well,' at both initial and final interviews.

Question 10: **How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child?**

Parent F stated that she was very poorly involved at the initial interview. Parent F stated that she had enjoyed taking part in the art activity and that it helped that another mother whom she knew was also there. At the final interview, Parent F felt slightly more involved than at the initial interview but felt she was still poorly involved. Parent F stated that she would have children in just three schools in the

next school year (as opposed to four schools in the current year) and that she would therefore have more time to attend involvement activities.

Question 14a: **How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child?**

Parent F felt at both initial and final interviews that she was very well consulted for her views in relation to her child and that her views were very well respected.

Question 14b: **How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues?**

Parent F felt at both initial and final interviews that she was very well consulted for her views in relation to wider school issues and that her views were very well respected.

Question 18: **How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel?**

At both initial and final interviews, Parent F felt very well supported by the school and felt poorly supported by its wider community links.

6.4 Key findings from case studies

The key findings from the case studies will now be presented, starting with a profile of the case study parents, after which Epstein's Typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991) will be used as a framework.

6.4.1 Profile of parents in case studies

All of the case-study parents are mothers. Four are past pupils of the project school, one is a past pupil of a neighbouring school and one grew up on the south

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side of Cork City. In terms of their own education, one parent completed Leaving Certificate, three completed Intermediate Certificate and two left school before Intermediate Certificate. Two of the parents stated that their own school days were difficult – one because of a lack of books and uniforms and one because she and her siblings had to work hard at home as their mother was out working. All of the parents want their children to complete Leaving Certificate and one already has a child at third level. The parents are less sure about their children proceeding to third-level education. While one parent already has a child at third level, no parent stated definitively that going to third level was in her future plans for her child.

Three of the parents are lone parents and three are married and living with their husbands. One of the married parents had previously been a lone parent. One of the parents has one child, one has two, one has three, two have four and one has five.

6.4.2   Epstein's Type 1: Basic obligations of families

Question 1 sought information on the basic obligations of families with relation to their children's education. To summarize the findings, the case-study parents saw their responsibilities as being interested in their children's education, ensuring the children got to and from school, providing them with books, lunches and uniforms, making sure they got sufficient sleep, making sure the children did their homework and helping with this, ensuring that the children respect others, including teachers,

and making sure that the children do not take anything that does not belong to them.

6.4.3   Epstein's Type 2: Basic obligations of schools

Questions 2-9 sought information on Epstein's Type 2 involvement, viz., basic obligations of schools. Questions 2-5 looked for information on parent-school co-operation and Questions 6-9 sought parents' views on parent-school communication. Key findings will now be presented.

6.4.3.1 <u>Parent-school co-operation</u>

At pre- and post-action stages, all of the parents considered that they and the school co-operate very well to help their children. There was therefore no reported increase of co-operation as a result of action undertaken during the project.

 Three of the parents stressed the centrality of the teacher in the parent-teacher relationship.

Issues were identified in relation to parent-school co-operation. Four parents considered that financial constraints could hinder parent-school co-operation. Two parents mentioned the pressure on children to have 'fancy' and expensive writing/colouring materials and clothing and the concomitant pressure on parents to provide these. (Note that the children wear a school uniform in St. Mary's, hence the pressure to have expensive clothing does not apply at school.) One of the

latter parents said she could not afford after-school activities for her children. Providing a quiet space for her daughter to do homework is difficult for this parent also. Communication was cited by one parent as a factor affecting co-operation. This parent considers that verbal communication is better than written and that teachers are prevented from communicating adequately with parents because they are too busy and have too many children to teach. This same parent stated that parents might not always be in the frame of mind to talk to teachers, may be guarded in their communication with teachers and may be slow to ask for help. She also feels that a clash of personalities could get in the way of parent-school co-operation. Other issues cited were lack of time to come to the school, parents working, illness or stress in the home, being a lone parent or having a sick child at home which may prevent the parent from bringing other children to school.

In relation to what might help parent-school co-operation, four parents stated that financial assistance might help. One of these suggested that the school put a ban on all but basic writing/colouring materials. One parent thought the courses run by the HSCL Scheme were good to improve co-operation and another felt it would be good to know that a child can be brought in late to school. The latter comment was made by a parent who said that it is difficult to bring other children to school when there is a sick child at home. (The comment refers to the fact that the children's attendance is marked before 10 A.M. and if a child arrives later than that, then the child has been marked absent. That day is counted as a non-attendance day when reckoning numbers for the Education Welfare Officer. If a child is absent for over

20 days, the Education Welfare Officer must be informed.) Finally, one parent mentioned the importance of praising the child and noted the difference the teacher's praise had made to her own child.

6.4.3.2 <u>Parent-school communication</u>

At pre- and post-action stages, all of the parents considered that they and the school communicate very well to help their children. There was, therefore, no improvement noted as a result of the action undertaken during the project. One parent mentioned that she could come and talk to the teacher anytime. Four of the parents considered that there was no need to improve on communication and four saw no challenges in communicating where there may be educational disadvantage. One parent felt that parent-teacher meetings were too short and not frequent enough. The same parent commented that, when she gets the school report during the summer holidays, the teacher is not available to discuss it. She also was of the opinion that unapproachable teachers could get in the way of good communication. Written communication was seen as problematic by one parent as notes brought home by children can get lost.

In terms of what could help, basic one-to-one parent-teacher communication was viewed as the best way of helping by one parent. Two parents cited incidences of good parent-teacher communication resulting in solving problems with children.

6.4.4 Epstein's Types 3 and 4: Involvement at school and in learning activities at home

Questions 10-13 sought information on Epstein's Types 3 and 4 involvements, viz., involvement at school and in learning activities at home.

This section will first present key findings at pre-action stage and then outline the action undertaken. Changes in involvement at post-action stage will then be noted.

6.4.4.1 Parental replies at pre-action stage

Most of the answers in this section centred on school involvement and answers were not as unanimously positive as they were in the section dealing with Epstein's Type 2 involvement. As regards how well parents were involved at pre-action, one parent stated she was not involved, one stated she was involved as well as possible, one said her involvement was getting better, one parent stated she was well involved and two stated that they were very well involved. It is interesting to note that the one parent who considered herself well involved and one of the two considering themselves very well involved had had no involvement in school-based activities prior to the project but considered that their relationship with the school was good and that they could keep in touch with teachers regarding their children's progress.

General issues hindering involvement, i.e., issues that parents identified but not specifically in relation to themselves, were the fact that some parents might be shy

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or reluctant to attend involvement activities, that parents might have younger children to look after or that parents might be hindered from attending due to worries, stress or sadness in their lives.

All of the parents cited personal difficulties in being involved. For one, big classes resulting in a reduction of time available to the teacher for involvement activities was a difficulty. The same parent stated that being a lone parent hinders involvement. Another parent found involvement difficult as she is the sole breadwinner and, moreover, has to care for a sick child. The same parent is hindered by financial difficulties and she has difficulty helping with homework. Another parent has difficulty providing a quiet space at home for her child to do homework. Childminding prevents one parent from being involved. One of the parents has five children in four schools and spends much time bringing them to and from school, leaving her little time for involvement. That parent sees a difficulty in being involved in just one of her children's schools as the other children might feel excluded and she also stated that she lacks the confidence to be involved. Finally, one parent stated that she had not been invited to be involved and that written invitations are inefficient.

General factors cited that might help involvement were parents helping teachers, thereby making more time for teachers to involve parents, and courses for parents.

From a personal point of view, parents offered opinions on what might help them to be involved. Suggestions included smaller classes, providing support for carers of sick children, homework clubs and being asked in person to attend. One parent said it would help if another parent she knew was attending. Another parent said that she had been involved in the *Bridging the Gap* literacy programme and that this helped her to feel 'not so daunted' and to feel connected with her daughter's learning and with the school.

6.4.4.2 <u>Actual parental involvement</u>

Prior to the action research period, two of the parents had taken part in involvement activities. Both were involved in reasonably long-term activities, viz., the *Bridging the Gap* literacy programme (both parents) and *Maths for Fun* (one parent). Four of the parents had never been involved prior to the action research period. One of these took part in an activity during the action research period which was not part of the action research, viz., a children's art class, with a parental involvement component, organized in the school by an outside agency.

During the action research period, three of the parents, including the two who had already been involved in the school prior to the project, became involved in an art project specifically related to the action research. The three remaining parents could not be involved in this project. One could not be involved because of stresses and difficulties she was experiencing during the action research period. A second was attending a course outside of the school which precluded her from being

involved. Another was prevented from being involved because she was caring for a sick child. However, these latter two parents attended a personal development course in the school, organised by the HSCL Coordinator, during the action research period.

6.4.4.3 <u>Changes in perceived levels of involvement at post-action stage</u>

At post-action stage, two of the parents noted an improvement in their involvement during the action research period. One of those parents had attended the art activity associated with the action research and observed that she had enjoyed it and that the fact that a parent whom she knew was also attending made it easier to attend. This parent had stated at pre-action stage that she lacked confidence to attend. The second parent who noted an improvement had not attended an activity specifically connected with the action research. She considered that her involvement had improved because her attendance at a personal development course held in the school through the HSCL Scheme gave her confidence to go into a community support programme and because she, the school and the Education Welfare Officers had worked in partnership on issues concerning her daughter's school attendance.

Regarding the parents who noted no change in their involvement at the end of the action research period, two had been involved in the art activity specifically related to the research. One of these considered that she was involved as well as possible at both initial and final interviews. The other considered herself well involved at

both initial and final interviews. While they both considered that there was no difference in their level of involvement, both reported that they had enjoyed the art activity and one stated that a family member wished to purchase the finished art work. One further parent noted no difference in her level of involvement but reported beneficial outcomes from a personal development course undertaken, through the HSCL Scheme, during the action research period. Only one of the six case study parents was not involved at all in the school during the action research period but considered that she was very well involved at both pre- and post-action stages.

6.4.5 Epstein's Type 5: Involvement in decision-making governance and advocacy

Questions 14-17 sought information on Epstein's Type 5 involvement, viz., involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy.

All of the case study parents considered at both pre-action stage and post-action stage that they are very well consulted in relation to wider school issues and all except one considered that they are very well consulted in relation to their child. The latter parent considered herself poorly consulted in relation to her child because the teachers do not have enough support and not enough time. In addition, she feels that parent-teacher meetings are too short and too infrequent. This parent had made the same observations in the section dealing with communication, where she also noted that parent-teacher meetings are held too early in the school year. At

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post-action stage, this parent still felt poorly consulted in relation to her child, although there had been an improvement in the timing of the parent-teacher meeting, a fact welcomed by this parent.

All of the parents felt that their views are listened to with respect. One parent noted, 'Any time I ever had a problem, the teacher would listen to you.'

With regard to challenges in consulting and listening to the views of parents where there may be some educational disadvantage, one parent felt that there may be a challenge in terms of the time available to a teacher. This parent also felt that if a teacher is 'standoffish,' that this could cause problems.

In terms of helping with challenges to consulting and listening to parents' views, where there may be educational disadvantage, one parent stated that care should be taken when allocating classes. She was referring here to teachers who may be 'standoffish' hindering partnership.

6.4.6 Epstein's Type 6: Collaboration and exchanges with community organizations

Questions 18-20 sought information on Epstein's Type 6 involvement, viz., collaboration and exchanges with community organizations.

At both pre-action and post-action stages, all of the case study parents stated that they felt very well supported by the school. All but two felt poorly supported by the school's wider community links. One parent felt very well supported by the school's wider community links. That parent mentioned the Community Centre (where activities are provided for children) and a Youth Club in this context. Another parent felt that enough leisure activities are provided by the school and the School Completion Programme and that she does not need the support of the wider community. The School Completion Programme received specific mention from two other parents in terms of the after-school and holiday provision of leisure activities offered to children. One parent mentioned the support received from Education Welfare Officers. The latter parent felt poorly supported by community agencies following a traumatic experience she had had. Three parents mentioned the lack of leisure facilities provided in the community. The expense of privately accessing such leisure activities was referred to by these parents also. These three parents considered areas such as local parks to be dangerous for children.

In terms of what the wider community could do to give parents more support, one parent stated that help from community agencies should be easier to access. Two parents considered that leisure activities should be freely available in the community.

Regarding the special need parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage might have for support from wider community agencies, five parents

stated that such parents may not have the resources themselves to provide extra-curricular leisure activities for their children. One parent felt that lone parents need support from the workplace in terms of providing flexible arrangements to allow for attendance at school events. Another parent stated that stress in people's lives may cause them to need community support. One parent felt that parents need to be supported so that their problems are known, leading to these parents being helped.

6.4.7 Summary of case study findings

While issues were identified in all areas, all of the case study parents considered, at both pre- and post-action stages, that they and the school co-operate and communicate very well to help their children. With regard to involvement, parents' responses were varied at pre-action stage, ranging from one who considered that she is not involved to two who considered that they are very well involved. During the action research period, three parents were involved in action directly associated with the action research. A further two were involved, during this period, in a personal development course in the school, provided through the HSCL Scheme. One case study parent was not involved in the school at all during the period. Reasons for the parents' inability to be involved during this period included attendance at courses, caring for a sick child, looking after small children, stress and trauma in a parent's life, lack of confidence and bringing children in a large family to and from different schools. Two of the parents considered that their involvement had improved during the action research period. The others

considered that there was no change in their level of involvement. All of the parents considered themselves very well consulted in relation to wider school issues at both pre- and post-action stages. All except one considered themselves very well consulted in relation to their child at pre- and post-action stages. The latter parent felt poorly consulted at both stages, due to lack of teachers' time and the length, frequency and timing of parent-teacher meetings. All parents felt very well supported at pre- and post-action stages by the school and all except two felt poorly supported by the wider community at both stages. The perceived lack of community support centred mainly on the lack of provision of leisure activities for children.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, the three research questions will be answered, with reference to the literature reviewed and the research undertaken. Recommendations arising from the research findings and the literature will be made. Strengths and limitations of the study will then be noted and areas will be identified for further study.

7.2 First research question: What is parent-school partnership?

The present research sought to answer the first research question through the inclusion of two interview questions which were used during interviews with individual parents and focus groups during the pre-action spiral. The interview questions were:

(1) What, in your opinion, is parent-school partnership?

(2) How important is it to have partnership between parents and school?

The views of sixty-eight individual parents and eight focus groups were obtained. The individual parents and parents in the focus groups had children in either Junior Infants or Second class during the 2004/2005, 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 school years, i.e., during the course of the pre-action spiral. Through the individual and focus group interviews, the views of 27% of the cohort of parents with children in Junior Infants and Second Classes during those years were obtained. In addition, the ten parents involved in planning during the main action spirals were interviewed at post-action stage, using the same questions

as at pre-action stage. Differences in understanding following the action were noted.

The pre-action spiral is described in Chapter Four and the main action spirals are described in Chapter Five.

In addition to the data acquired through the pre-action spiral and post-action interviews, data was also sourced from the literature to help answer the first research question. The research question will now be answered, using data acquired from the literature first, followed by parental understandings from the present research.

7.2.1   Understandings of partnership from the literature

Although the idea of 'partnership' has gained currency, in social discourse, in recent decades (see e.g., Conroy 1996, Lee 1996) and the concept of *parent partnership* has been put forward as a crucial element contributing to children's success in school (e.g., Alexander 1997, Department of Education 1991, Department of Education 1995, Department of Education and Science 2005, Government of Ireland 1996, Martin 1998, National Forum Secretariat 1998), the absence of a clear definition of parent-school partnership has been noted in the literature (Brain and Reed 2003, Heywood-Everett 1999, MacGiolla Phádraig 2005). Indeed, if one examines the literature presented in Chapters One and Two, it will be noted that most of the literature therein provides examples of *how* partnership may be implemented without telling us what partnership is. This is not to say that definitions do not exist and, in Chapter

Two, definitions of partnership were provided. These definitions embraced such concepts as the sharing of aims (Hughes, Wikeley and Nash 1994), the sharing of power (Block 1993, Conaty 2002), the sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability (Pugh and De'Ath 1989), mutual respect (Driessen et al., 2005, Pugh and De'Ath 1989) and open communication (Driessen et al. 2005). Driessen et al.'s (2005) definition of educational partnership was chosen for the present study. Driessen et al. (2005, 528) believe that 'educational partnership presupposes mutual respect, shared interests and open communication between parents, teachers and the school.' They define educational partnership as 'the process in which partners aim to strengthen and support each others' skills in order to produce results which signify an improvement for the children involved' (Driessen et al. 2005, 528).

While the definitions available in the literature provide the underlying vision for partnership they do not yield practical information on what partnership actually is in the school context. We must look further and piece together this information from other sources in the literature.

The Education Act, 1998 provides the most important information on parent-school partnership for Irish schools because it is in this Act that schools' responsibilities to parents are enshrined in law. Amongst these responsibilities are the promotion by the school of effective liaison with parents (Article 6g), the provision to parents of records relating to students' educational progress (Article 9g) and evaluation (Article 22:2b), the encouragement of the involvement of parents in their children's education (Article 23:2e) and the

promotion of contact between the school, parents of students in the school and the community (Article 26:3).

A 2003 Department of Education and Science Inspectorate document (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003) gives embodiment to the requirements of the Education Act, 1998 and adds to our understanding of what partnership is in the school context. For example, Boards of Management are asked to consider the effectiveness of their procedures for ensuring meaningful communication with parents in all aspects of the school's operation, the degree to which the school facilitates contact between parents and teachers and the school's procedures concerning parent-teacher meetings. The Board is also asked to look at the extent to which the school 'engages in regular review, on a partnership basis, of its relationship with parents and the wider school community, including outside agencies' (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003, 9).

A difficulty was noted in Chapter Two (pp. 88-90) in reading the literature on parent-school partnership. Notwithstanding, the conceptual frameworks and models of parent-school partnership outlined in Chapter Two (pp. 90-105) provide us with further information as we answer the question, 'What is parent-school partnership?'.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989, 1992) allows us to see parent-school partnerships in an ecological way by presenting four systems. The *microsystem* is the child's immediate environment. The *mesosystem* involves relations between two or

more systems involving the child and is where the present study is set. The partnership process will be affected and influenced by the *exosytem*, i.e., links between systems, some of which will contain the child and some which will not. The most relevant systems in the latter category for the present project are the communities surrounding the child's home and the child's school. The *macrosystem* is the overarching pattern of culture in which the child is situated. Bronfenbrenner (1989, 210) stresses the importance of meanings made by people (child, teacher, parent) within society and 'how processes and their outcomes are perceived by members of the culture.' Understandings of partnership will be mediated by the meanings made by the key players, i.e., parents and teachers.

The personalities and dispositions of parents and teachers will also affect how partnership is viewed. In Getzel's (1978) view, these personalities and dispositions will be embedded in the school community and cannot be understood apart from it. Keyes (not dated) illustrates the complexity of the teacher as a person and the parent as a person and underlines the importance of communication in the parent-teacher relationship. Eccles and Harold (1996) stress the importance of beliefs and how beliefs influence practice and they underline the cyclical nature of development.

Epstein provides a typology of family-school partnership (Epstein and Dauber 1991, 290-1), categorizing six different types, viz., basic responsibilities of families, basic obligations of schools, involvement at school, involvement in learning activities at home, involvement in decision-making, governance and

advocacy and collaboration and exchanges with community organizations (Epstein and Dauber 1991, 290-1). Epstein (1993, 711) emphasizes the vast range of partnership possibilities when she states that 'there are hundreds of practices that can be selected or designed to operationalize each type' of involvement.

The literature provides us with examples of partnership in practice, thereby enhancing our understanding of what parent-school partnership is and showing us that partnership can be interpreted in many ways. There is a marked absence in the literature illustrating Epstein's Type 1 involvement, viz., basic responsibilities of families. This bears out Alexander's (1996, 15) point that 'the formal education system needs to do much more to recognise and support families' fundamental role as the foundation for all learning.' A study (Moroney 1995) of a home/school partnership in a second-level school in a deprived area in Ireland, in which it was attempted to improve parent attendance at induction meetings for incoming First-Year students, illustrates Epstein's Type 2 involvement, viz., basic obligations of schools. A study by Lannin (2005), a reading intervention project with parental involvement as a key component, undertaken in the school in which the present project is set, shows how Epstein's Types 3 and 4 involvements, viz., involvement at school and involvement in learning activities at home, can be implemented. A study by O'Gara (2005) looks at practice regarding parental consultation in school development planning in Irish schools and illustrates Epstein's Type 5 involvement, viz., involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy. Processes described by the HSCL Coordinators (2005-2006) encompass

Epstein's involvement Types 2-5 as well as Type 6, viz., collaboration and exchanges with community organizations.

The present researcher used Epstein's Typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991) in the development of the interview for parents whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage. (See Chapter Six, pp. 319-320 and Appendix XII.) The typology was also used when discussing the findings from the interview questions in Chapter Six.

7.2.2   Understandings of parent-school partnership from the present project

Epstein's Typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991) will be used to discuss parental understandings of partnership from the present project. Parental understandings at pre-action stage will be discussed first. Then, changes in understanding at post-action stage will be discussed.

7.2.2.1 <u>Epstein's Type 1: Basic responsibilities of families</u>

Epstein and Dauber (1991) state that Type 1 involvement, viz., basic responsibilities of families, includes providing for children's health and development and the creation of a supportive home environment for children's learning. Most parental understandings referred to partnership in the school context. One focus group considered that partnership means parents and teachers assuming joint responsibility for children's education. Education would not then be left solely to the responsibility of the school.

7.2.2.2 <u>Epstein's Type 2: Basic responsibilities of schools</u>

The two key areas covered here are co-operation and communication.

7.2.2.2.1   *Co-operation*

For 30 of the 68 individual parents (44%) who gave their views at the pre-action stage, partnership means co-operation. Some of the parents expressing this view chose to qualify their understanding of co-operation. The school and the home working together was the most common meaning provided by them. Fullan (2003) underlines the mutual dependency of parents and teachers, especially in an educational disadvantage setting. He contends that 'poor parents are highly dependent on the efforts of school staff if meaningful opportunities are to be afforded their children' and that 'teachers also remain dependent on parental support to achieve success in their work' (Fullan 2003, 55). Some parents understood partnership to mean a good parent-teacher relationship.   The importance of relationship-building is stressed in the literature (e.g., Comer 1995, Government of Ireland 1995, Zappone 2007). Ryan and Galvin (2008, 17) hold that 'relationships come before partnership and it is the quality of the established relationships that is the lynch-pin of partnership.' Mutual parent-teacher respect was considered by the parents to be an understanding of partnership and is also stressed in the literature (MacGiolla Phádraig 2005).

Other parental understandings of partnership were mutual parent-teacher support, parents feeling welcome in the school and parents and teachers having a common interest.

Some parents gave views on why partnership is important. These views broadly correspond with the reasons listed by the OECD (1997) as to why parents become involved in their children's education. Partnership is important for 25 of the 68 individual parents (37%) for reasons concerned with their child's welfare. This understanding underlines the fact that the child is at the centre of the parent-teacher relationship (Keyes, not dated). Twelve of the 68 parents (18%) considered that partnership is important for reasons concerning the child's day-to-day experience in school, including the child's safety, security, confidence and aspects of the child's general well-being at school such as comfort, enjoyment, happiness, easier school life, ability to learn, maintenance of interest in school and overall attitude to school. Affective reasons concerning the child were also noted by the focus groups as a reason for partnership. No focus group specifically considered partnership important for learning outcomes and just 3 of the 68 individual parents specifically mentioned that partnership is important for educational outcomes though, arguably, all of the affective reasons mentioned above could enhance the child's educational outcomes. Conaty (2002, 69) notes that the purpose of the partnership promoted by the HSCL Scheme 'is to enhance the pupils' learning opportunities and to promote their retention within the educational system.'

7.2.2.2.2   *Communication*

The parents placed a high value on communication as a meaning of partnership. This is in keeping with their right to be 'informed on all aspects of the child's education' (Government of Ireland 1995, 9).

The importance of parent-school communication is stressed in the literature (e.g., Conaty 2002, Hobbins McGrath 2007). Forty-three of the 68 individual parents (63%) who gave their views and 3 of the 8 focus groups considered parent-school partnership to mean communication between home and school. Speaking of working with community partners to create a successful school, Santiago, Ferrara and Blank (2008, 47) state that educators must 'hear the perspectives of all stakeholders – both within and outside the school – about the needs of local children and families.' The most common understanding of communication as partnership was communication so that parents would have a better understanding of the school system. Crozier (1997) reminds us of the importance of this form of communication, especially in the context of educational disadvantage, where parents may not have 'educational knowledge such as … how the education system works.' Some parents understood partnership to mean communication through parent-teacher meetings, communication of the child's progress and communication of problems involving the child. A 2003 DES document, *Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003, 9) asks schools to consider 'the quality of the flow of information between the school and the parents of each pupil.' MacGiolla Phádraig (2005, 96) believes that it is 'a sharing of knowledge, or a real communication that is central to partnership, and not solely the sharing of information.' Some parents see partnership as sharing ideas and knowing what is happening. Parents therefore see communication as two-way, both from school to parent and from parent to school. Schools have a statutory obligation

to communicate with parents but the information parents bring to schools is also of vital importance. As the Irish Government White Paper on Education reminds us, 'parents bring to the child's education the unique expertise derived from their intimate knowledge of the child's development, and their knowledge of particular needs and interests and circumstances outside the school' (Government of Ireland 1995, 139).

Forty-four of the 68 individual parents (65%) stated that partnership was important for reasons concerning communication for broadly the same reasons as above, i.e., so that they could learn more about the school system – including the immediate classroom environment and school management – as well as ways of addressing problems their child might have and learning about the child's progress. Parents also considered partnership as communication important for mutual parent-teacher information-giving. This, in some parents' view, would result in highlighting ways to improve education, in recognizing children's strengths and weaknesses, in parents becoming aware of children's development and in teachers becoming aware of children's home surroundings. Partnership was also seen as important to ensure beneficial outcomes for parents, to improve the parent-teacher relationship and to make parents feel welcome in the school. These outcomes are also identified in the literature (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996).

7.2.2.3 <u>Epstein's Type 3: Involvement at school</u>

For 12 of the 68 individual parents (18%), partnership means parental involvement in the school. This includes, for some, participation in school

functions and parental participation in the classroom. Four of the 8 focus groups understood partnership to mean involvement of parents in education in the school and the home. School involvement is identified in the literature as an important understanding of partnership (e.g., Ames et al. 1995, Bastiani 1996, Borg and Mayo 2001, Comer 1991, Connors and Epstein 1995, Davies 1990, INTO 1997, Krasnow 1990, Sobel and Kugler 2007). Conaty (HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006, 11) sees parents as a resource for their own children in the classroom, as well as at home and in the community, and lists ways they can be involved at school, viz., involvement in areas such as reading and paired reading, the novel, art and craft activities, drama, library organization, *Mathematics for Fun*, *Science for Fun*, computer work and cookery.

7.2.2.4 Epstein's Type 4: Involvement in learning activities at home

As noted above, 4 of the 8 focus groups understood partnership to mean involvement of parents in education in the school and the home. Three individual parents (4%) considered that partnership means home involvement. This means, for them, involvement with homework. The INTO (1997, 22) considers that 'the regular undertaking of homework provides a very obvious and practical way in which parents can demonstrate their interest in and commitment to their child's education.' The Irish Government White Paper on Education (Government of Ireland 1995, 140) states:

> The role of parents in the home is crucial in forming the child's learning environment by promoting positive attitudes towards education, by encouragement and the fostering of self-esteem and by direct instruction relevant to the child's age and learning needs, such as reading activities and homework supervision.

Steele (1999) refers to the ways in which the parent supports the school from 'outside' as 'external' collaboration. He holds that this '"external" collaboration is absolutely essential to the wellbeing of the child, the welfare of the school, and the health of home-school relations generally' (Steele 1999, 141).

7.2.2.5 Epstein's Type 5: Involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy

Epstein's Type 5 involvement, viz., involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy was weakly identified both as an understanding of partnership and a reason why partnership is important. Just 4 of the 68 individual parents (6%) considered partnership to mean joint decision-making at pre-action stage and 2 (3%) of the parents considered being in a Parents' Association as an understanding of partnership. Two of the 8 focus groups considered partnership to mean that parents and teachers are equal in joint decision-making.

7.2.2.6 Epstein's Type 6: Collaboration and exchanges with community organisations

Parental understandings of partnership did not embrace collaboration and exchanges with community organisations. The Irish Government *White Paper on Education* (Government of Ireland 1995, 7) sees effective partnership as involving 'active co-operation among those directly involved in the provision of education and the anchoring of educational institutions and structures in the wider communities they serve.' Collaboration with the broader community is

seen by the HSCL Scheme to be a crucial element of partnership (Department of Education and Science 2007). O'Gara (2005, 21), though writing in the context of consultation with parents in the development of the school plan, found that 'partnership with parents remains a relatively new concept for Boards of Management, principals, teachers and parents themselves.' It seems to be the case that the parents in the present project are still at the stage of viewing parent-school partnership as a simple two-way relationship between parents and school and do not understand broader community collaboration to be part of that partnership.

7.2.2.7 Post-action parental understandings

Post-action understandings of partnership were acquired from the parents who were involved in planning during the main action spirals. (See Chapter Five, pp. 298-303.) At pre-action stage, 43 of the 68 individual parents (63%) and 3 of the 10 focus groups considered communication to be an understanding of partnership. At post-action stage, all 10 parents noted communication as an understanding. At pre-action, 30 of the 68 individual parents (44%) and 5 of the 8 focus groups understood partnership to mean co-operation while at post-action, all 10 parents noted this meaning. At pre-action stage, 12 of the 68 individual parents (18%) and 4 of the 10 focus groups considered partnership to mean involvement while, at post-action, all 10 parents considered it to mean involvement. The increased emphasis on co-operation and involvement at post-action stage possibly reflects the increased, sustained and positive experience the ten planning parents had of co-operation and involvement during the main

action spirals. The parents may also have experienced increased communication with the school during the action period.

The most notable difference in understandings at post-action stage was the inclusion of joint decision-making as an understanding by the ten planning parents. At pre-action stage, no individual parent or focus group mentioned joint decision-making as an understanding of partnership and just one individual parent and no focus group saw partnership important for joint decision-making. Though we cannot prove that this change in understanding came about as a direct result of the involvement of these parents in planning, it is possible that the change is associated with parental involvement in planning during the main action spirals. It represents an important shift in thinking because consultation with parents is mandatory under the Education Act, 1998 (Article 21, 3). Haynes and Ben-Avie (1996, 47) note that including significant parental participation in decision-making is desirable 'in order to enhance the educational process and improve the overall climate of schools.' Parental understandings at post-action stage were further enhanced by the inclusion of an increased understanding of partnership as a mutual support for parents and teachers and especially as a mutual parent/parent support. The importance of parental networking and mutual support has been noted in the literature (Cullen 2000, Cheadle 2008). Goodman and Sutton (1995, 1) note how parents attending workshops in a school 'felt renewed by their contacts with one another and by the respect, caring, and support they encountered.' A new understanding also emerged at post-action stage in that parents expressed the importance of partnership for enhancing both parents' knowledge of the

curriculum and learning outcomes for children. There was also an increased understanding of partnership as enabling parents to learn and understand more about the role of the teacher.

7.3 Second research question: How can parent-school partnership be increased in an urban primary school?

The second research question was addressed in the main action spirals, described in Chapter Five. The two main action spirals were concerned with exploring how parent-school partnership could be improved in St. Mary's School. One spiral involved parents of children in Junior Infants, the other involved parents of children in Second Class.

As the action spirals progressed, the action was evaluated. In addition, evaluation took place at the end of the action spirals when the ten parents who had been involved in planning (henceforth referred to as 'the planning parents') during the action spirals were asked the same questions as were asked at interviews at pre-action stage. Differences in experience were noted.

In this section, conclusions will be drawn based on (a) evaluation of the action undertaken during the main action spirals; and (b) the findings from the post-action interviews. When drawing conclusions, Epstein's typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991) will be used as a framework. This typology outlines the different forms of partnership and, arising from the findings, it will be attempted to identify strategies to increase partnership in as many areas as possible and so to answer the second research question.

7.3.1   Epstein's Type 1: Basic obligations of families

The research conducted during the pre-action and main action spirals did not seek to address Epstein's Type 1 involvement.

7.3.2   Epstein's Type 2: Basic obligations of schools

The two partnership areas under consideration here are parent-school co-operation and parent-school communication.

7.3.2.1 <u>Parent-school co-operation</u>

Parent-school co-operation was identified as an understanding of partnership by 30 of the 68 individual parents (44%) and by 5 of the 8 focus groups at the pre-action stage of the present project. At pre-action stage, only 3 of the 68 individual parents (4%) and no focus group stated that partnership had enabled co-operation between them and the school.

At post-action stage, all 10 parents who had participated in planning during the main action spirals considered that partnership had enabled co-operation between themselves and the school. We can therefore say that partnership had increased during the project in the area of parent-school co-operation. It must be noted that this form of partnership involved just 10 parents out of approximately 100 parent sets (Junior Infants and Second Class) and these 10 may be biased in terms of willingness to co-operate. The OECD (1997, 16) notes that 'the active, committed parents' who join and run parents' councils and such bodies 'are unlikely to be typical of the parents as a whole – or to represent their views.' Still, the partnership model developed through the main action spirals is a model of how parent-school co-operation can be increased.

Co-operation with the planning parents was intensive and sustained for a full school year plus one further school term.

Schools need to consider how best to maximize co-operation with parents. Speaking of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, a 2003 DES document asks schools to consider 'the support given to parents of pupils from such backgrounds, and other stakeholders, to participate in the operation of the school, and the way that participation is facilitated' (Department of Education and Science Inspectorate 2003, 35). Engaging in shorter-term co-operative projects than the work described in the main action spirals with more parents at more class levels would be advisable as such a system would be more inclusive and easier to sustain. The present project involved the same planning parents for the entire duration of the action spirals and these parents have committed to a continuation of their work in the area of planning after the life of the present project. It will be important that other parents are included and empowered to engage in similar planning work. In a previous study undertaken in the project school (Hanafin and Lynch 2002), long-serving parent representatives on committees were viewed as a source of disempowerment. The present researcher has anecdotal evidence from parents that some parents feel intimidated going to meetings where other long-serving parents are all known to each other and are used to working with each other, leaving 'new' parents feeling excluded and inexperienced. Comer (1991, 187) sees continuing service by parents as limiting 'both their own development and opportunities for

others.' Comer also notes the possibility that long-serving members could become less representative of the community and their children.

The process undertaken at St. Mary's was made possible by the presence of both the HSCL Coordinator and an administrative principal (i.e., with no teaching duties). It is doubtful if the same process could have taken place without at least one of these positions being in place in the school. Furthermore, the process was facilitated by the existence of a Parents' Room. Such space for planning is necessary to put the type of co-operation undertaken in St. Mary's for the action research in place.

The strategy used to increase co-operation in the present project involved acquiring a common understanding of parent-school partnership and using this data to enable parents and school staff to work together to identify partnership issues that needed to be addressed. The Yale Child Study Centre School Intervention (Comer 1991) used a similar strategy, albeit on a much larger scale, in that a theoretical framework, on which to build future action, was developed collaboratively by a team which included parents and school staff in schools in the US working with disadvantaged populations. One of the basic principles of the HSCL Scheme is that the basis of activities in the scheme is the identification of parental needs and having those needs met (Conaty 2005-2006). In the present study, a number of issues were identified as needing attention, arising from the pre-action data. These included general parental involvement, parental awareness of their right to be consulted as an understanding of partnership, parental involvement in decision-making and

planning and the collaborative creation of a school environment supportive of learning. All of these issues could not be addressed by the action research. Deciding which issues to address was a collaborative and inclusive process, in keeping with the characteristics and principles of action research (Cohen and Manion 1994, Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998) and involved respectful listening (Comer 1991) to parents by school staff.

The initial issue addressed was the need to increase involvement. This increased involvement occurred when the parents of Junior Infants planned and implemented classroom activities for the pupils in their children's classes. This led to parents and school staff addressing a second issue, viz., parental involvement in planning. Through the former activities, parents and school staff collaborated in the creation of a school environment supportive of learning. With regard to Second Class parents, the process took a different route but the same issues were addressed. The latter parents were already involved in school activities prior to the action research. Resulting from this, they became involved in the formulation of a plan on parent-school partnership and this planning led to involvement in a school environmental activity.

7.3.2.2 <u>Parent-school communication</u>

At pre-action stage, 43 of the 68 individual parents (63%) and 3 of the 8 focus groups indicated that communication is an understanding of partnership. The importance of good home-school communication is stressed in the literature (Davis and Cooke 1998, Maring and Magelky 1990). Keyes (not dated, 8) emphasizes 'the importance of communication to bridging, leading to initial

effective parent-teacher partnerships as well as promoting more extensive parent involvement as characterized by Epstein's typology.' Driessen et al. (2005, 528) believe that 'educational partnership presupposes … open communication between parents, teachers and the school.'

In spite of the importance accorded to communication by the parents in the present research, only 6 of the 68 individual parents (9%), and no focus group, stated, at pre-action, that partnership had enabled better communication between themselves and class teachers. No focus group and 5 of the 68 individual parents (7%) indicated at pre-action that partnership enabled them to learn about their children's progress. This raises questions for the school, in view of Ames et al.'s (1995, 21) finding that 'parents' overall evaluations of the teacher, their sense of comfort with the school, and their reported level of involvement was higher when they receive frequent and effective communications.'

At post-action stage, all of the planning parents indicated that partnership had enabled them to communicate with class teachers, to learn about their children's progress and to learn about the school system. We can say that the research project appears to have been associated with an enhancement of communication for the planning parents but, as in the case of co-operation, it must be remembered that this was a relatively small cohort of parents when compared to the possible target group.

Issues with communication were identified but not addressed through the research.

The first issue concerned written parent-school communication. This form of communication may be assumed unquestioningly by schools to be effective and this may not, in all cases, be true. Parental data from the present project indicates that notes sent home with children get lost or that notes may be 'all wrong.' Payne (2008, 52) refers to 'educationese,' i.e., language that may not be readily understandable for parents. Parents indicated that verbal communication is better than written. This conclusion poses problems for schools, especially large schools. While the HSCL Coordinator, where one is in place in a school, will, in the course of his/her work, visit homes and meet parents in the school, he/she will not be able to communicate events verbally to all parents nor would it be possible for other school staff to manage to do this. This, therefore, leaves schools with the task of identifying effective communication strategies. The essential aspect of this task is to include parents in the identification process as parents are at the receiving end of school-home communication and are therefore in the best situation to assess the effectiveness of this communication and to suggest suitable strategies.

The second issue identified was the effectiveness of how events are communicated. It was noted that if parents see that involvement events are not 'too serious' they might be more willing to participate and, indeed, the researcher had personal experience of this when she failed to get any parent to come into the school to plan an involvement activity until she introduced the

word *fun* to the invitations. This small word may be what Davies (1990, 71) terms 'an entering wedge,' giving parents an impetus to be involved. In a description of an action research project in an Australian school, it was noted that a letter from two parents, aiming to put a health awareness project in place, seeking help from the Parents' and Citizens' Association, elicited no response until a connection was made between the healthy school process and the need to develop a playground (Davis and Cooke 1998), which seemed a much more tangible need than the broader need of improving attitudes to health.

The third issue identified was the vagueness of invitations to attend involvement events. It was observed that some invitations leave parents feeling that they 'don't know what they're coming down to.' Schools need to spell out in invitations exactly what is involved and to make invitations as parent-friendly as possible.

7.3.3   Epstein's Type 3: Involvement at school

At the pre-action stage, school involvement was listed by 12 of the 68 individual parents (18%) as an understanding of partnership but only 9 of the 68 individual parents (13%) stated that involvement had improved for them as a result of partnership. This data indicated that parental involvement needed to be increased at St. Mary's. This is especially important in St. Mary's as 'a high degree of parent involvement in the educational process' (Hyland 2005, 3) is considered to be an essential strategy to address educational disadvantage.

The involvement put in place for the present project has been described in Chapter Five. At post-action stage, all of the parents involved in planning during the main action spirals stated that, through partnership, they had become involved in school activities. Attendance data for the different events shows how Epstein's Type 3 involvement, involvement in school, increased. Eight parents were involved in classroom activities at Junior Infant and Senior Infant level during the 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 school years. In the previous three school years, no parent had been involved in classroom activities at Junior and Senior Infant levels. (Prior to that, there had been parental involvement in literacy in these classes through the *Bridging the Gap* Project.) During the course of the action project, 28 parents (from Senior Infants and First – Fourth Classes) participated in a history walk of the local area. Four parents were involved in planting activities with the children. Parents had never been involved in a history walk nor in gardening activities previously in the school. All of the 15 parents who returned questionnaires evaluating the history walk stated that they would be willing to participate in a similar involvement event in the future.

Outcomes of parent-school partnership were identified during the course of the action research. Since all of the identified outcomes are beneficial, they could usefully be included in a parent-school involvement policy and a list of the outcomes could be displayed in a prominent position in the school to encourage parent-school involvement.

Child outcomes are the first important outcome of parent-teacher partnership (Epstein 1995, Lannin 2005, National Literacy Trust 2001, Toomey 1989). Pupil outcomes noted in a 1995 evaluation of the HSCL Scheme included 'improved behaviour, improved attendance, improved scholastic achievement, greater care in their school work, and more positive attitudes to school and teachers, to themselves, and to their parents' (Ryan 1995, 25). Knowledge of these outcomes would be an important motivating factor for parents to become involved because the child is at the heart of the parent-teacher relationship (Keyes, not dated 7). While 7 of the 68 individual parents (10%) and no focus group stated at the pre-action stage that, from their own experience, partnership had benefited their children, all of the planning parents stated at post-action stage that partnership had benefited their children. At pre-action stage, 1 of the 68 individual parents and no focus group stated that partnership had made learning fun for their own children. At post-action stage all of the planning parents, reporting of their own partnership, stated that partnership had had the latter outcome. At pre-action stage no individual parent and two focus groups stated that their children like it when parents get involved. At post-action stage, all of the planning parents considered that their children like it when the parents get involved. The findings from the evaluation of the history walk show that all of the participating parents considered that their children like it when they take part in school activities and that the walk was a good learning activity for the children. Other pupil outcomes noted, from the parents' own experience, were an increased sense of comfort for children in school when their parents are involved, the fact that children are both excited and proud when their parents are involved, the fact that children can see their parents and teachers working

together as one and the fact that it is easier for a child to learn if the parent knows what is going on in the child's classroom. As will be noted, most of the outcomes listed by the parents are affective outcomes. This concurs with evidence provided by Archer and Shortt in a 2003 evaluation of the HSCL Scheme. They found that 'what might be regarded as affective outcomes (pupils' attitude to and experience of school) are described as having occurred to a greater extent … than are outcomes relating to pupils' behaviour, attendance or performance' (Archer and Shortt 2003, 91).

Parent outcomes were also noted as a result of partnership. At pre-action, only 1 of the 68 individual parents and no focus group stated that partnership had resulted in their feeling welcome and respected in the school. All of the planning parents, reporting on their experience at post-action stage, said they felt welcome and respected in the school. At pre-action stage, no individual parent or focus group stated that partnership had resulted in their getting to know other parents, while at post-action all of the planning parents and all of the parents who evaluated the history walk noted this outcome. Again, from their own experience, at post-action stage, parents noted that the support offered by other parents facilitates involvement and offers a forum where problems with children can be discussed and advice gained. Kellaghan (2001) would consider this networking a form of social capital where people are able to acquire benefits, e.g., the development of shared aspirations, mutual aid and support and the exchange of information. Parents noted that they enjoyed the involvement activities and communicating with the children, that they learned about the history curriculum and that discussing local history with their

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children at home has become much more relevant than before as a result of the history walk. When parents are involved at school, they are likely to learn more about their children's education (Toomey 1989) and ways of helping them (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996).

There are also teacher outcomes from partnership. This project did not seek teachers' views but benefits from partnership accruing to teachers were noted by the parents. The mutual respect and trust arising from partnership, identified by parents, will certainly be a benefit to teachers as will the fact that partnership is seen as leading to an enhanced parent-teacher relationship. (The benefits accruing to teachers identified in the last sentence will also accrue to parents.) Parents held the view that partnership has the effect of reducing the image of the teacher as an authority figure and of bringing parents and teachers closer. It was considered that partnership gave the parents a greater insight into the teachers' work and consequently an appreciation of the difficulty of the task, especially where classes are big. It would be productive if teachers could get an equivalent insight into the world of the parents. As Miretzky (2004, 842) points out:

> Just as teachers wish parents understood the difficulties they face in their classroom, so too do parents wish teachers understood the realities of their neighbourhoods and family situations. This learning happens when people feel comfortable enough to talk to each other and share their worlds, a deceptively simple intervention school leaders and administrators might productively embrace.

A number of parental involvement strategies were identified by the present research which may help schools as they 'explore ways of supporting parents in becoming more fully involved in the education of their children' (Department

of Education and Science 2005a, 66). The first strategy learned, as a result of the present research, by this researcher is that involvement activities must be meaningful and relevant for parents, as stressed by Eccles and Harold (1996). Otherwise, parents will be slow to attend. Note the difficulty the researcher experienced when trying to get parents to attend individual and group interviews at pre-action stage. Note also the difficulty she had in getting parents to attend initial planning meetings at the start of the action spirals.

The second strategy arises from the first. That is, if parents attend involvement activities and find them relevant, they may be likely to continue attending. The planning parents in the present project continued to participate for the entire duration of the project. It is therefore important for schools not just to make activities relevant but to plan for success.

The third strategy is related to the first and second and is that, if parents take part in one involvement activity, they will be likely to be involved in another. We observed how the Second Class parents who were already involved in involvement activities prior to the research had no difficulty in becoming involved in the group to formulate policy.

A further involvement strategy which schools could usefully employ would be to make sure that parents know another parent who will be involved as some parents lack confidence to come to events (Ryan 1995).

We noted how the first action spiral was based on a parent's interest in art. Basing involvement activities on parents' interests is a sensible strategy. Indeed, parental involvement strategies should be differentiated to ensure the inclusion of as many parents as possible (McNamara et al. 2000, Vincent and Tomlinson 1997).

The action outlined in the main action spirals was carefully planned and parent-school partnership must be strategically planned. The literature reminds us of the importance of this planning (Comer and Haynes 1991, Haynes and Ben Avie 1996, Krasnow 1990).   Henderson and Berla (1994, 16) state that 'the more the relationship between family and school approaches a comprehensive, well-planned partnership, the higher the student achievement.' This planning will take many forms. For example, as we will note when answering the third research question, some parental involvement will have to be individually planned with parents. Some will be structured and will not allow for parental input in its design. An example of this would be where parental involvement is called for in, e.g., a health education programme provided in the school by an agency outside the school.

It is important, however, that schools and parents collaboratively design some involvement programmes tailored to parents' needs, that involve 'attentive listening' (Conaty 2002, 58, citing Pantin 1974, 1979) by teachers and principals and that 'take cognizance of the attitudes, values and priorities of the local people' (Conaty 2002, 58, citing Pantin 1979, 1984). As already noted, one of the basic principles of the HSCL Scheme is that the basis of activities in

the scheme is the identification of parental needs and having those needs met (Conaty 2005-2006). Comer (1991) provides a good example of this kind of collaboration between parents and schools, stating that 'listening to parents' was the first strategy used in the Yale Child Study Centre School Intervention. Comer shows how such collaboration can produce radical changes in outcomes for young people attending those schools.

Parent-school policy documents should include a definition of partnership relevant to the particular school and should outline which activities come under the heading of partnership for that school. This will serve to rule out 'misunderstandings and confusions between interested parties' (MacGiolla Phádraig 2005, 94) and enhance the parent-school partnership process. Finally, the researcher wishes to add one strategy which was not identified by parents. That is, parents must be affirmed and must see that their participation makes a difference (Pelletier and Brent 2002).

Issues related to involvement were identified by parents at the pre-action stage, both in a general way and as a result of the parents' own experience. The literature also provides evidence of issues relating to involvement (e.g., Dolan and Haxby 1995, Epstein 1992, Finders and Lewis 1994, McKibbin et al. 1998, Mittler 2000, Ryan 1995). The issues identified in the literature and by the present research remind us that parent-school partnership is not a simple two-way relationship between the parent and the school but is influenced by both proximal and distal environments as well as meanings parents and teachers bring to and from those environments (Bronfenbrenner 1989, 1992).

Regarding general issues, work commitments, childcare, lack of time and unapproachable teachers were the principal issues identified by the present research. General issues accorded less importance included parental attitudes, home factors, lack of parental interest and confidence and timing of involvement events. The main issues identified by parents, from their own experience, at pre-action stage were again work commitments, childcare and lack of time. No parent cited the presence of unapproachable teachers as an issue, based on the parent's own experience, at pre-action stage, though a lack of trust between parent and teacher was cited by one parent. Krasnow (1990) reminds us of the ambiguity teachers feel towards parental involvement and states that, while teachers have high hopes about the possible benefits accruing for children from parental involvement, they also have concerns about parents being in the school and classrooms.

Some of the issues identified by parents are outside of the control of the school, e.g., parents' work or time commitments. School personnel working with the local community, as is the requirement of DES for schools in the SSP (Department of Education and Science 2005), may result in the identification of provision of childcare facilities for parents, so that they can be more involved in their children's schools. Schools need to work with parents to identify the best times for involvement activities.

As regards the issue of unapproachable teachers, training for teachers in the area of parent-school partnership is essential (Conaty 1999). Teacher training in

the area of parent-school partnership was considered an essential component of the Yale Child Study Centre School Intervention (Comer 1991) and has been advised elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Hornby 2002). Leadership training is also essential for principals to help them facilitate parent-teacher relations. Keyes (not dated, 7) reminds us of 'the complexity of the teacher-as-person and the parent-as-person, and the skill that is required to bridge the differences that exist'. One of the aims of the Yale Child Study Centre School Intervention, during which the organization and management of schools changed 'from an authoritarian, hierarchical approach to a participatory, collaborative one' (Comer 1991, 186), was to create structures in schools to allow parents, staff and students to interact in a co-operative, collaborative way. It is essential that leaders in schools know how to create these structures.

At post-action stage, just two issues were mentioned by the planning parents. One was the issue of parents feeling guilty at not being able to be involved. MacNamara et al. (2000) describe similar parental feelings. The parent who identified this issue in the present research stated that parents should be told by the school that it is acceptable to be involved in just some activities. Getzels's (1978) social system perspective has relevance here. Getzels holds that two types of phenomena are embedded in the social system, in this case, the school. These are the institutions with component roles and expectations (rights and duties) that will fulfil the goals of the system and the individuals with component personalities and dispositions (cognitions and affects) who inhabit the system. It would be very important for schools to ensure that the roles they expect parents to fulfil are realistic and achievable. According to Crozier (1999,

324), 'teachers tend to have a particular set of expectations of parents' role and behaviour, and thus when the parent fails to match this model, teachers are critical and accuse them of lack of support'. It could be counter-productive and discouraging for parents if they experience guilt about their perceived lack of involvement. This could lead to a fulfilment of McNamara et al.'s (2000, 485) warning that partnership may 'result in a certain amount of powerlessness, frustration, blaming and inadequacy on both sides.'

The second issue, identified by one of the planning parents, is the issue of a lack of agreed procedures when parents are involved. The point made by this parent is of vital importance and needs to be addressed by schools because a blurring of parent-teacher roles and the possible ensuing conflict could jeopardise the parent-teacher relationship. Conaty (2002, 160) holds that 'one of the most common causes of misunderstanding and friction between individuals and groups is the lack of clarity around *roles* and the inherent *rights* and *responsibilities* that accompany those roles.' Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 10) found that the more a group and its members agree on an individual member's roles and role behaviours, the more productive is the group.

Three further issues were identified by the researcher in her observation of the main action spirals. The first issue is the non-involvement of fathers, an issue also noted in the literature (Ryan and Galvin 2008, Vincent and Warren 1998, West et al. 1998). The second issue is the relatively poor involvement in terms of numbers. During the main action spiral, approximately 12% of possible parents were involved. Low attendance at parental involvement events has been

identified as an issue in the literature (McKibbin et al. 1998). The third issue is the relatively low participation of parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage. This issue was addressed in Chapter Six of this dissertation.

7.3.4 Epstein's Type 4: Involvement in learning activities at home

The main action spirals did not address this type of involvement.

7.3.5 Epstein's Type 5: Involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy

At the pre-action stage, no individual parent or focus group mentioned joint decision-making or being part of governance as an understanding of partnership. When parents spoke about how they felt about partnership in general or when they spoke about partnership from their own experience, they did not mention joint decision-making or being part of governance or advocacy.

In a previous study undertaken in the project school (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 40), parents complained of a general lack of consultation and deemed consultation practices to be 'inadequate and unsatisfactory.' Eccles and Harold (1996) show the influence of parent beliefs on parent practices. While the parents in the present research made no complaints about the consultative process, it is possible that they did not believe that they had a role in decision-making or knowledge of their right to be so involved. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 3) hold that 'even well-designed school programmes inviting

involvement will meet with only limited success if they do not address issues of parental role construction.' The lack of parental awareness of their role in decision-making must be given serious consideration by school staff in St. Mary's. If we accept Hughes et al.'s (1994, 7) contention that a partner is 'someone who … shares – and even helps to shape – the aims of the school, and is committed to putting these aims into practice,' then St. Mary's School cannot really claim to be fostering true partnership with parents if parents do not see a role for themselves in decision-making. There is another consideration here also and that is that if parents are not helped to move into this decision-making role, then the school will not move forward into the cyclical development outlined by Eccles and Harold (1996). Eccles and Harold demonstrate that, when action takes place leading to outcomes, those outcomes then become part of a new starting point from which new action will take place.

During the main action spirals, the planning parents progressed from Type 3 involvement (involvement at school) to Type 5 involvement (involvement in decision-making, advocacy and governance). While this progression to Type 5 involvement involved just ten parents, we can view it as one of the 'small shifts and changes,' referred to by Frankham and Howes (2006, 617), which 'are essential if change is to take place in the culture of the school.'

At post-action stage, all of the planning parents considered joint decision-making and the joint setting of goals as being both an understanding and part of their experience of partnership. This group of parents had engaged in a process that possibly led them to this understanding. The Second Class parents had

been involved in classroom activities organized by the school and considered that this helped them to become involved in formulating the parental involvement policy. The Junior Infant parents started out by being involved in collaborative planning for a classroom activity and this led to their involvement in adding a component to the school curricular (history) plan.

Both of these examples, i.e., the way both sets of parents came to the planning process, show how important it is to involve parents first in activities that they perceive as non-threatening. Having enjoyed the latter activities and found that their participation was useful and appreciated, parents may feel confident to move into the area of policy formation and collaborative decision-making. The HSCL Coordinators (2005-2006, 65) state that the purpose of the inclusion of parents, pupils, teachers and community members in policy formation is 'to give all parties a voice in what is contained in the policy, to draw on the life experience of the school community, and to give a sense of ownership of the policy.'

Formal structures are in place in St. Mary's where parents are involved in decision-making (i.e., Parents' Association and Board of Management) and governance (i.e., Board of Management). These structures may be threatening for some parents. McKibbin et al. (1998) demonstrate how parents in an Australian school had difficulty engaging in formal school decision-making structures. By contrast, when a meeting was held in a parent's home, the same parents felt comfortable talking freely about issues that concerned them. Moreover, if parents have had no experience of any school involvement, it is

unlikely that they will become involved in formal structures such as the Parents' Association and Board of Management.

The present research has demonstrated that parents can be involved in decision-making at different levels, e.g., planning a simple classroom activity, planning a curricular activity or involvement in policy making and school planning. As demonstrated by this research, parents can step from one level of involvement to another. As Lannin (2005) notes, structures need to be put in place to facilitate parents to become part of the education process and this is particularly true in the case of parents whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage because parents' socio-economic status may affect how parents intervene in school on behalf of their children (Crozier 1997). Speaking of Parents' Associations, MacGiolla Phádraig (2003) suggests that there should be flexibility in structures of the Associations, in timings of meetings and the way in which the business of the meeting is conducted.

7.3.6 Epstein's Type 6: Collaboration and exchanges with community organisations

While the main action spirals did not address Epstein's Type 6 involvement, i.e., collaboration and exchanges with community organisations, both the Junior Infant parents and the Second Class parents engaged on a small scale with the local community during the main action spirals. The Junior Infant parents, in planning the history walks, negotiated access for the children to local buildings and the Second Class parents liaised with another local school in connection with a proposed mural. The parents showed that they have a local

knowledge and a relationship with people in the locality not possessed by any teachers who are not native to or do not live in the locality.

This local knowledge and these relationships could be used to good effect by the school in two ways. First, schools could tap into parents' knowledge base of the sociocultural context of the communities served by the school (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996). Second, they could work with parents to enhance both the schools' and the parents' collaboration and exchanges with community organizations. It was shown in the case studies, in Chapter Six, that parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage have need for community support with regard to leisure facilities for their children. Using the local knowledge of the parents, schools could work in liaison with the parent body to investigate the leisure facilities available in the locality and to make all parents aware of them. If no such facilities exist, schools and parents could investigate the possibility of putting such facilities in place, with the help of local voluntary and statutory bodies.

7.4   Third research question: How can parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage be involved in parent-school partnership?

The third research was addressed using an individualised focus on the case study parents' involvement needs, in a pre-action interview. Opportunities were given for involvement and post-action interviews were conducted. The case studies were described in Chapter Six.

This section will begin by commenting on the profile of the parents who participated in the case studies. These were parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage. The research question will be answered using Epstein's typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991) as a framework.

7.4.1 Profile of parents in case studies

The literature (e.g., David 1993, Vincent and Warren 1998, West et al. 1998) shows that mothers are more involved than fathers in their children's education. All of the case study parents are mothers. Four of the six case study parents are past pupils of the school in which the project is set and a further parent grew up in the immediate environment of the school. It was noted in Chapter One that the area in which the project school is situated has higher levels of unemployment, earlier school leaving and lower levels of household income than other areas of the city (Forde 2000). While we cannot state that, by staying in the area, these parents will be more likely to have children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage than those parents who left, we can say that, by staying in the area, the parents are limiting their own employment chances and perhaps placing themselves at greater risk of economic disadvantage than if they had moved to a more advantaged area. The literature indicates that there is a link between economic disadvantage and educational disadvantage (e.g., Duncan and Seymour 2000, Kellaghan et al. 1995, Kerckhoff et al. 1997, Shiel et al. 2001, Harris and Ranson 2005, Gosa and Alexander 2007).

Just one of the six case study parents completed second level education. One of the criteria used by the DES to assess levels of disadvantage in schools in 2005 was the number of children in the school, one of whose parents did not complete the Junior Cert or an equivalent examination (Department of Education and Science 2005b). Four of the six case study parents exceed this criterion as they have taken the Intermediate Certificate examination.

Another criterion used by the DES to assess levels of disadvantage in 2005 was the number of children in a school who came from a family of five or more children (Department of Education and Science 2005b). Just one case study parent has a family of five; all of the others have less though we note that two have families of four.

A third criterion used by the DES was the number of children of lone parents in the school (Department of Education and Science 2005b). Half of the case study parents are lone parents and one had previously been a lone parent. The literature provides evidence that lone parents are less likely to be involved at school than parents with partners (Epstein 1992).

With regard to the parents' educational aspirations for their children, all hope that their children will complete second-level education. There was a sense that the parents believed that 'education is *the* (italics in original) tool that gives a child life choices' (Payne 2008, 52). Higgins (2007) reports similar findings in her work with parents experiencing economic disadvantage in Limerick, a city in the west of Ireland. Of the six case study parents in the present study, one

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already has a child who has completed second-level education and is now at third-level and two have children within a year of completing second-level. These are promising statistics, in view of a 2003 DES report indicating a disproportionately high early school-leaving rate for young people in some socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Walshe 2003). The case study parents are less sure about their children's chances of proceeding to third-level education than they are about wanting them to complete second-level. A 2003 DES report (Flynn 2003) showed that only 20% of the lowest income groups go to third-level, compared with 97% of the highest.

The six parents were identified for inclusion in the case studies because all fulfilled at least three of the criteria for identifying children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage as set down by the DES (Department of Education and Science 2005b). Moreover, the six parents involved in the case studies all had children in either Junior Infants or Second Class, the two classes involved in the main action spiral, during the 2006/2007 school year. The findings from the case studies confirm the selection of these parents as it was observed that all of the parents spoke, from their own experience, of 'impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools' (Education Act: Article 32, 9).

7.4.2   Epstein's Type 1: Basic obligations of families

It is clear from parents' replies to Question 1, which sought to establish how parents view their responsibilities, in relation to the school, to help their

children, that all of the parents take their responsibilities seriously. These responsibilities mainly centre on getting the children to school and providing them with the resources they need for school. Fullan (2003, 55) sees parental support entailing, at a minimum, parents 'ensuring that their children attend school regularly and arrive ready to learn.' This research project did not focus on Epstein's Type 1 involvement but parental replies in this section indicate that, even if the parents are not involved in the school, they are involved in their children's education at home and are investing much care in this task. O'Brien and Flynn (2007, 83) hold that 'marginalised mothers cannot expect the same return for the energies they expend on caring for children in education, and their children may not benefit from their mothers' educational care work in the ways that those from more dominant groupings can.' Speaking of this care work, O'Brien and Flynn (2007, 83) further contend that 'one of the key problems to be tackled is its invisibility.' CMRS advises 'promoting the parents' educational role as equal and complimentary to that of the teacher' (Education Commission of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors 1992, xxiii). This involves an acknowledgement by schools of the importance of the educational role undertaken by parents in the home and a broadening of the vision of parent-school partnership to encompass parental involvement at home. This does not happen when 'home-school relations are … discussed in narrow terms focusing on individual parent-teacher interactions' (Vincent 1997, 272).

7.4.3 Epstein's Type 2: Basic obligations of schools

The questions seeking information on Epstein's Type 2 involvement looked for the parents' views on parent-school co-operation and communication.

7.4.3.1 <u>Parent-school co-operation</u>

With regard to co-operation, all of the case study parents considered, both at pre- and post-action stages, that they and the school co-operate very well. This means that there was no mechanism within the research for measuring change in co-operation as a result of action undertaken. On one level, the parents' positive views on parent-school co-operation are reassuring for the school but, on another level, they are a cause for concern. The case study parents have identified issues regarding parent-school co-operation and yet they say that parent-school co-operation is very good. Some of the issues identified are outside of the school's control, e.g., the fact that parents may have stress, worry or illness in the family or that they are lone parents. Other issues identified are school-based. Why are the parents not becoming involved in structures where they can attempt to address these issues? We will consider the latter question when we look at Epstein's Type 5 involvement. For the moment, a study by Crozier (1997) may serve to help us understand the uncritical stance taken by the case study parents. This study found that, while most parents saw their role in similar ways, the ways in which they supported their children differed along class lines. Middle-class parents had high expectations for their children, leading them to intervene and contact the school frequently. Working-class parents, on the other hand, rarely intervened and tended to be reactive rather than proactive (Crozier 1997).

The centrality of the teacher in the parent-teacher relationship was stressed by three parents. Based on the outcome of parental involvement studies, Epstein (1995) states that teachers' practices to involve families are more important than variables such as race, ethnicity, social class, marital status or mothers' work status for determining if and how parents become involved in their children's education. Parents and teachers may have different expectations for partnership, depending on the meanings they each bring (Bronfenbrenner 1989) and on role expectations of the school (Getzels 1978). The literature notes the need for teachers to receive training in how to implement parent-school partnership. For example, Conaty (1999, 470) observes that there is an 'urgent need' within the HSCL Scheme for 'systematic and regular teacher development to allow each teacher to become a "home-school teacher" in attitude.' This development should serve to make teachers aware that parents may not always be in the 'frame of mind' to talk to teachers and that some parents are slow to ask for help. It should also make teachers sensitive to the fact that many parents have stresses and worries in their lives that hinder parent-school co-operation.

The case study parents have provided suggestions which, if implemented, might serve to ease parents' worries and burdens, thus allowing them more scope for parent-teacher co-operation and involvement. Courses for parents provided through the HSCL Scheme are seen to be a help. Homework clubs where children could be helped with homework would both ease the burden for some parents and provide very practical help for the children. Payne (2008)

refers to the limited support system available to many students living in households characterized by poverty. She states that, if such a student is not completing homework, asking the student's parent, who may be working two jobs, to make sure the student does his/her homework is not going to be effective. Payne (2008) holds that it would be more productive to provide time and space in school for the student to complete homework.   Schools could also attempt to ease the financial burden on parents by, e.g., implementing an efficient book rental scheme or putting an embargo on expensive writing materials. While parents and schools must comply with the Education Welfare Act, 2000, regarding children's school attendance, perhaps a measure of flexibility is called for in the case of very disadvantaged parents, where there may sometimes be difficulty about getting children to school on time. It just may be the last straw for a stressed parent who is worried about complying with the Act to arrive at the child's school to find that the child has been marked absent.

Finally, in this section, one parent raised the issue of the praising and encouragement of her child by the teacher and of the difference this made to the child and herself. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994, 249) refer to 'circular pathways in which motivation fuels parent involvement, and involvement fuels motivation, which fuels performance.' Ames et al. (1993, 15) conclude that 'parents may be more willing to become participants when they have a sense of hopefulness.'

7.4.3.2 <u>Parent-school communication</u>

We can view parental responses concerning communication in the same light as responses concerning co-operation, i.e., though parents identified issues, they still considered, at both pre- and post-action stages, that they and the school communicate very well. Four of the parents considered that there was no need to improve on communication and four saw no challenges in communicating where there may be educational disadvantage. This contrasts with the findings of a previous study conducted in the project school (Hanafin and Lynch 2002). While some parents in that 2002 study were positive about their involvement with class teachers, this involvement was 'much more commonly spoken about as inadequate, difficult, off-putting, excluding and frightening' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, 41). The contribution of the HSCL Scheme to this change of parental feeling must be acknowledged. A 2003 evaluation of the scheme (Archer and Shortt 2003) found that a majority of coordinators and principals were of the opinion that parents felt less threatened by schools and teachers as a result of the scheme.

Four issues concerning communication were identified by parents. These were the length, frequency and timing of the parent-teacher meetings, the fact that school reports are sent to parents during the school holidays when teachers are not available to discuss them, the inefficiency of written communication and the inapproachability of some teachers. The latter issue might be addressed through teacher training and school ethos. Regarding parent-teacher meetings, there are DES regulations regarding the provision of these (Department of Education and Science 2004) but schools in disadvantaged areas could usefully

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consider a degree of flexibility in this regard. Having access to as much information as possible regarding their children's education is vitally important for parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage and enhanced communication would reap benefits. Two of the case study parents referred to positive outcomes for their children when they and the children's teachers had been consistently and regularly in touch regarding problems the children had. Payne (2008, 52) notes that schools in disadvantaged areas that have scheduled times for parents and teachers to have in-depth talks about the children 'have strengthened the rapport between parents and teachers and lessened discipline referrals.' Epstein (1992, 6) considers that 'information must be given to families by the schools on how to help in productive ways at all grade levels.' Miretzky (2004, 817) notes that 'students who know that parents and teachers are regularly and respectfully in touch tend to work harder.' Ames et al. (1995, 21) found that 'parents' overall evaluations of the teacher, their sense of comfort with the school, and their reported level of involvement was higher when they receive frequent and effective communications.'

7.4.4 Epstein's Types 3 and 4: Involvement at school and in learning activities at home

In this section, conclusions will first be drawn regarding parents' perceived levels of their own involvement at the pre-action stage. We will then look at factors affecting involvement. The actual involvement that took place will then be discussed, followed by a discussion on the parents' perceived changes in their level of involvement at the end of the action research period.

7.4.4.1 <u>Parents' perceived levels of involvement</u>

When answering the first research question, the reader's attention was drawn to the absence in the literature of a clear definition of parent-school partnership (Brain and Reed 2003, MacGiolla Phádraig 2005). The case study parents' replies regarding their own levels of involvement indicate that partnership has different meanings for different people and its meaning varies from situation to situation. We note from the data provided by the case study parents the influence of both proximal and distal environments on parent-school partnership and the meanings parents bring to the partnership (Bronfenbrenner 1989). Neither of the two parents who were most involved prior to the action research, one in the *Bridging the Gap* Project, the other in *Maths for Fun* and paired reading, actually rated their involvement using one of the measures provided, viz., very well, well, not sure, poorly, very poorly. Instead, they rated their respective involvements as, 'Getting better' and 'As well as possible.' Their replies possibly indicate how difficult it is to measure partnership because, who is to say what it means to be 'well' or 'very well' involved. Two of the parents who considered themselves 'well' and 'very well' involved respectively, at pre-action stage, had had no school involvement before the research period. Yet, they perceived themselves as well involved because they both communicated with the school on issues concerning their children's school attendance and progress. The one parent who considered that she was not involved at pre-action stage was actually, in the view of the researcher, as involved as the latter two parents in that she regularly keeps in touch with the school regarding her children's progress and, like them, attends events in which her children are involved. The literature reminds us that teachers and parents

sometimes disagree as to whether parents are involved and the extent of the involvement (Bakker, Denessen and Brus-Laeven 2007, Dauber and Epstein 1993, Epstein 1992). Lareau (1996, 60) offers good advice in this context, stating that 'there is a fundamental disparity in the definitions of what parents mean by being involved' and that 'informing parents that they should be active is ineffectual because many parents ... already believe that they are active.'

7.4.4.2 <u>Factors affecting involvement</u>

Parents identified general issues affecting involvement. These were the shyness or reluctance of some parents to attend, childminding responsibilities or worries, stress and sadness in parents' lives. Issues such as these have been identified in the literature (Dolan and Haxby 1995, Finders and Lewis 1994). Issues pertaining to the case study parents themselves were numerous, considering that there were only six case study parents. The issues identified were: (a) big classes which limit teachers' time to foster involvement; (b) being a lone parent; (c) being the sole breadwinner; (d) having to care for a sick child; (e) financial difficulties; (f) difficulty helping with homework; (g) childminding; (h) delivering many children in one family to a number of schools; (i) the danger of some children in a family feeling excluded if a parent is involved in their sibling's school but not theirs; and (j) lack of parental confidence to be included. In addition, when it came to actually implementing involvement, one parent could not be involved because of a traumatic event in the family.

An examination of the above eleven factors shows that one is school-based, seven are related to factors in the home, one concerns parental difficulty with homework, one relates to how children feel and one to how the parent feels. The outcome of this examination may result in school personnel feeling pessimistic about their chances of increasing involvement amongst parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage as so many factors are outside the control of the school. There is, however, a measure of consolation and hope here. The consolation centres on the reasons for the difficulty that schools have in getting parents who might be experiencing disadvantage involved (Dauber and Epstein 1993). School personnel can often feel guilty and discouraged at their lack of success when, in fact, they sometimes cannot influence the factors affecting non-involvement. The hope stems from the fact that, within the parental replies, there are pointers as to how the school might foster involvement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 8) remind us that, while 'schools cannot realistically hope to alter a student's family status, schools *may* (italics in original) hope to influence selected parental process variables in the direction of increased parental involvement.' The issue of big classes hindering involvement was identified also in a previous study undertaken in the school (Hanafin and Lynch 2002). There is a role here for non-mainstream class teachers, i.e., HSCL Coordinators, principals, learning-support and language-support teachers to help class teachers to foster involvement and this actually happens in many schools, including the project school. Schools could also look to lightening the burdens parents feel in relation to their children's education, thereby enabling them to have more time and energy for involvement. Under the DEIS Action Plan (Department of

Education and Science 2005), schools receive financial assistance to address educational disadvantage. While these extra resources cannot be used to help parents personally, great care should be taken to use the resources effectively so that financial burdens connected with their children's education are eased for parents. One very practical way would be to ensure the presence of an efficient book rental scheme. Classes to assist parents to help their children with homework are put in place in many schools through the HSCL Scheme, including the project school. Sometimes, the parents who really need these classes cannot come to them because of factors outside of school, e.g., looking after smaller children. This is where linking with the wider community comes into play. Schools cannot provide solutions on their own (Davies 2002) but, through working with the community, crèches and other facilities to help parents could usefully be put in place. Schools could also network with neighbouring schools to arrange joint involvement activities. In this way, a parent with many children in many schools could take part in one involvement activity involving more than one child and more than one school. This happens in the project school through the HSCL Scheme, where the school links with the two other primary schools and two second-level schools in the parish to organize, e.g., courses for parents and joint involvement activities centring around issues such as friendship and anti-bullying. It was obvious that at least one of the case study parents did not know that such practices exist or did not avail of them. Schools could usefully monitor the incidence of parents who have a number of children and make sure they are aware of these joint involvement events.

A further issue that schools could address is the lack of parental confidence associated with attendance at involvement events. This was also identified during the main action spiral. It seems that parents can sometimes feel more confident about attending if they know another parent attending. Speaking of attendance at adult education classes based in a designated disadvantaged primary school in Limerick, Higgins (2007) notes that 'friendship and solidarity amongst the learners themselves were identified as factors that both encouraged and sustained involvement.'

7.4.4.3 Involvement of case study parents

Prior to the research period, two parents had had previous school involvement. Looking at the profiles of these two parents in the context of the combined profile of case study parents adds to our understanding of which parents are involved. One of these parents was the only case study parent who had completed her Leaving Certificate. This parent had just one child. The other parent had been a lone parent when her elder daughter was in primary school but is now married and has just one child in primary school. This parent commented on the fact that, when she was the sole carer and breadwinner, she could not be involved as she was always too busy and tired. Amongst the findings of a study by Dauber and Epstein (1993) were that better educated parents and parents with fewer children are likely to be more involved than less educated parents and parents with larger families. Being married or having a partner does not, however, always facilitate involvement. Two other case study parents are also married and were not involved prior to the research. One of these is very busy dealing with the needs of her five children. The other has had

a traumatic family event during the action research period and, though the parent does not indicate this in her answers to the interview questions, she may have experienced stress and worry in her life previous to that event that prevented her from participating in involvement events. The remaining two parents who were not involved prior to the action research are lone parents with, respectively, a sick child and younger children to care for.

Looking at involvement during the action research period, we see that just one parent took part in no school activity during the period. This was the parent who had a traumatic family event and it is clear that this parent had not the time or energy to be involved, nor was she in the frame of mind to do so. There is a danger that school personnel may see the non-involvement of parents such as this parent as an absence of care for the child's education (Finders and Lewis 1994, Lee and Bowen 2006, Sobel and Kugler 2007). While acknowledging the challenge to involvement experienced by parents such as this, schools must be unflagging in their efforts to foster and facilitate the involvement of such parents because, when parents are involved at school, not just at home, children do better in school and stay in school longer (Henderson and Berla 1994). Furthermore, when parents are involved in their children's school, parents are more likely to learn more about their children's education and ways of helping them (Toomey 1989). Looking at parental involvement from another viewpoint, it is clear that if benefits accrue to children from involvement, then children of non-involved parents will be further disadvantaged (Toomey 1989). Furthermore, the social capital of non-involved parents will be reduced, with deleterious results for these parents' children. Social capital 'refers to social

networks available to parents that enhance a pupil's ability to benefit from educational opportunities' (Haghighat 2005, 215). Cullen (2000) believes that parents' social capital value is diminished when they spend less time interacting with their children's school friends or associates or when they do not know or interact with their children's teachers. Cheadle (2008, 25), citing Horvat, Weininger and Lareau (2003), states that 'parents network and acquire information at children's events and when they are involved at their children's schools.' Schools should therefore be very careful that their involvement practices do not actually serve to disadvantage some parents even further.

Two parents, neither of whom could take part in the action directly connected with the action research, took part in a personal development course organized through the HCSL Scheme during the action research period. Judging by parental evaluation of this participation, it is clear that this was the type of involvement that was beneficial and useful to these parents at that time. One parent was empowered by the course to go into a community support programme and the course gave the other parent the interest to further her education. With regard to the three parents who took part in the art activity directly related to the action research, one was the married parent who had previously been a lone parent and who consistently takes part in involvement activities. One was a lone parent who took part because her daughter loves art and who took part in another art involvement activity not connected with the project but during the course of the project. The third parent was helped to take part because another parent she knew, a friend of hers, was taking part. This third parent had stated, at pre-action, that she lacked confidence to take part.

We can learn valuable lessons on parent-school partnership by looking at the involvement of this very small cohort of parents. It must, however, be borne in mind that this is a very small sample and the researcher does not claim to generalize the claims to the larger body of parents who may be suffering disadvantage. One really clear conclusion we can draw, and this can be generalized, is that involvement needs to be differentiated to suit individual needs. If we ask for the same type of involvement from all parents (Lareau 1997), then our efforts to involve all will almost certainly fail. This was clearly illustrated in the main action spiral where parents received a blanket invitation to participate in partnership activities and where the participating cohort of thirty-eight parents included just two parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage. In fact, it could be argued that, during the main action spiral, the school was unintentionally reproducing an undesirable educational practice (Lareau 1997), viz., the exclusion of some parents. It is also interesting to note that, in the case of four of the case study parents, though they all said that responsibilities outside of the school precluded involvement, yet these four came to the school for events that suited them or catered to their needs.

The case studies provide evidence that some parents are coping with difficulties in their lives that impact on their involvement and on their children's education, e.g., financial difficulties, difficulties around being a lone parent or the sole breadwinner or difficulties associated with stress, worry or trauma. Payne (2008, 51) states that 'many low-income parents are so over-whelmed

with surviving daily life that they can't devote time to their children's schooling.' Parents must be helped to overcome these difficulties before they will be able to concentrate on being fully involved in their children's education. In Conaty's (2002, 19) view, 'it is unlikely that children can benefit from the educational system if the family is just surviving.' The school can offer support to parents but it is up to statutory and community agencies to support parents in the home and in the community. The school can and does liaise with these agencies through the HSCL Scheme to help parents but the school is still limited in its remit. Because disadvantage is multifaceted, it needs 'an integrated, *multi-sectoral* (italics in original) response to address it' (Cullen 2000, 12).

7.4.4.4 Perceived changes in involvement level at post-action stage

In discussing the changes in the perceived level of involvement of parents at post-action stage, the reader is asked to bear in mind the point made above that involvement/partnership means different things for different people. Four parents noted no improvement in involvement at the end of the research period but were still happy that they were well involved (one parent), very well involved (two parents) and involved as well as possible (one parent). One parent who considered herself very well involved has never taken part in an involvement activity. Of the two parents who considered that their involvement had improved, one had not previously participated in school involvement activities but took part in the art activity connected with the project, so there was a clear improvement in her involvement. The second parent who noted an improvement did not take part in the art activity but noted an improvement in

other partnership areas. The first of these was the partnership between parent, school and Education Welfare Officer centring on the child's school attendance. The parent clearly felt supported by this partnership which helped her, not just with her daughter's schooling, but in the area of the relationship with her own family. Furthermore, this parent noted that the support she had received from the school during a traumatic time was the only support she received from any quarter. This parent remarked on the visibility in the school of the researcher, in her role as principal, and noted that this visibility makes it easier for parents to approach the principal. Payne (2008) stresses the importance of creating a welcoming atmosphere in the school for parents. The latter case study parent also commented on the fact that the personal development course she had undertaken through the HSCL Scheme helped her to go into a community support programme and that being involved in the *Bridging the Gap* Project helped her to feel 'not so daunted' by school.

We see yet again, from this section of the research, that perceptions of partnership are very personal. Partnership is a broad concept and encompasses vitally important areas such as ensuring children's school attendance. Partnership can be facilitated by the visibility and ease of approach of the principal and other school staff. Partnership can have beneficial outcomes for parents in areas not directly concerned with the child. Parent-school partnership may be the only supportive structure in a parent's life. Finally, partnership in one area may facilitate partnership in another.

7.4.5 Epstein's Type 5: Involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy

All of the case study parents considered, at both pre-action and post-action stages, that they are very well consulted regarding wider school issues and that their views are very well respected. All except one considered, at both pre-action and post-action stages, that they are very well consulted regarding their child and that their views are very well respected. One parent considered, at both pre-action stage and post-action stage, that she is poorly consulted regarding her child and she attributed this to a lack of teacher time for consultation as well as to the short duration, infrequency and bad timing of parent-teacher meetings. This lack of consultation is, therefore, in the parent's view, mainly a simple consequence of lack of time available to talk rather than an exclusion from consultation. This perception of very good consultation contrasts with the perceptions of parents in a previous study undertaken in the project school (Hanafin and Lynch 2002).

Challenges noted in the present study in relation to consultation were the lack of time available to teachers for consultation and the fact that teachers might be 'standoffish.' Miretzky (2004, 815) refers to a lack of opportunity for 'direct and meaningful parent-teacher interaction.' Crozier (1997, 327) argues that 'parents' perception of teachers as superior and distant is reinforced by teachers' own stance' and that 'this does little to encourage parents into a more proactive partnership.' The need for training for teachers in the area of parent-school partnership has already been noted.

The case-study parents did not express a wish to be involved in decision-making. They are not alone in this in the context of the project school. It was already observed, in the main action spiral, that parents, at pre-action stage, did not consider joint decision-making to be an important understanding of partnership. Moreover, some parents may be confusing consultation with communication, as is evident from one comment. In the context of consultation, one parent noted, 'Anytime I ever had a problem, the teacher would listen to you.'

In the course of the research, the case study parents identified issues of concern to them. These included the heavy financial burden placed on them to provide for their children's needs at school, the fact that sufficient time is not available to them to communicate with teachers, their inability to help with homework and the lack of leisure activities available to their children in the community. Yet the parents consider that they are very well consulted by the school and did not express a view that they should have been consulted on the above issues or that they have a right to be consulted on issues such as these. These parents do not seem to know that they have a right to consultation and, arguably, they do not seem to know what consultation really means. School personnel are aware of their duties to involve parents in the consultative process under the Education Act, 1998 and should engage in a '*political socialization process* (italics in original) that does not manipulate parents but rather works with them in understanding how parent partnership can result in benefits' (Haynes and Ben-Avie 1996, 46). Formal structures exist in the school through which

consultation takes place, viz., the Parents' Association and the Board of Management. These formal structures can be off-putting and frightening for parents (McKibbin et al. 1998) but there are less threatening ways in which parental voices can be heard. One of these is through expressing their views via parent representatives on these formal structures.

While many parents of all classes may feel inadequate about engaging in school governance (Crozier 1997) parents experiencing disadvantage may have special difficulty (Finders and Lewis 1994). This is why they need to be helped and why schools should carefully consider strategies for involving the latter parents in consultation. A good start would be to make parents aware of their right to consultation and also to help them reappraise the role they have constructed for themselves in relation to their children's education. As Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 9) point out, 'parental role construction appears important to the involvement process primarily because it appears to establish a basic range of activities that parents will construe as important, necessary and permissible for their own actions with and on behalf of their children.' If this role construction excludes participation in decision-making, then parents will not see themselves as adopting this role.

7.4.6 Epstein's Type 6: Collaboration and exchanges with community organisation

At both pre- and post-action stages all of the case study parents felt very well supported by the school and all except two felt poorly supported by the school's wider community links. One of the parents felt supported by the

community, mentioning the Community Centre and Youth Club in particular, but stated that parents have to know what is available in the community to access these services. Another parent felt that she did not need community support and that the school provides all of the extra-curricular activities that her children need. Criticisms of community support concerned two areas, viz., the lack of leisure facilities provided by the community for children and the lack of support from community agencies when a parent is experiencing difficulty. Financial constraints were widely cited by parents as hindering their own efforts to provide leisure activities for their children and dangers and violence in the area surrounding their homes were a worry for some parents. Services connected with the school, viz., the Education Welfare Board and the School Completion Programme, were mentioned favourably by parents in terms of the support they provided. Indeed, the only after-school and holiday time leisure facilities available to the children of some parents were provided by the latter.

A really salient factor of parental replies in this section is the narrow view they present of 'community.' Consider Epstein's (1995, 229) definition which is the one used for the purposes of this dissertation:

> Community refers to the child's home neighbourhood, the school neighbourhood, school context, and the wider local community of business, civic, cultural, religious, and other organizations and agencies that influence children's learning and development and that could enhance family and school influences on children.

The case study parents do not refer to neighbours, to local businesses, to civic and cultural groups, e.g., girl guides, boy scouts, sports groups, musical or drama groups or church groups that are, in fact, present in the community. There is no sense, arising from the parental replies, of 'the cohesion among

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those who are stakeholders in a school, built on acceptance of differences, a commitment to the common good, and a recognition that the school and its environment are interdependent and mutually supportive' (Miretzky 2004, 819).

With regard to the perceived lack of leisure activities, there are certainly such activities available, as noted by one case study parent. Barone (2006, 1052) notes Bourdieu's theory of class ethos and states:

> Bourdieu considered this influence as expressing an irrational tendency that compels people to *over-react* (italics in original) to the objective difficulties that they face. Working-class families are thus led to collude in their own disadvantage, as they fail to take advantage of the (limited) opportunities available to them.

Perhaps some parents do not know how to access community leisure activities for their children. In the case of activities not being available near to where some of the children live, there may be a role for school staff to support parents in lobbying for activities to be put in place. The school also needs to help parents look at the totality of support available in the community to encompass a broader vision than available leisure facilities.

Milbourne (2005, 692) considers that 'the structures and organisation of partnership work in public services, as currently conceived, run counter to the flexibility that effective work in settings accessible to disadvantaged families often require.' This may mean that the children of these families are not deriving educationally rich experience from the surrounding community. Natriello et al. (1990, 7) hold that students who are educationally disadvantaged have been exposed to insufficient education experience in at

least one of three domains, i.e., the school, the family or the student's community (Natriello, McDill and Pallas 1990, 13). Thus, the community is construed as contributing to educational advantage or disadvantage. The Combat Poverty Agency (1998, Introduction) sees educational disadvantage as 'the complex interaction of factors at home, in school and in the community ... which result in a young person deriving less benefit from formal education than their peers.' As Cullen (Cullen 2000, 8) points out, educational disadvantage is linked directly to 'the social and economic characteristics of the community where the school is located or the child lives.' This means that there is a need 'to address educational disadvantage by intervening as much with the systems surrounding children as with children themselves' (Cullen 2000, 8). Moreover, 'the problems of educational disadvantage cannot be solved in mainstream school-based programmes alone but are strongly affected by the wider community and society' (Spring 2007, 5). Milbourne (2005, 690) speaks of 'the complex interactions' involved in 'joined-up delivery work' and states that 'the skills, time and energy required for agencies and individuals to establish the relationships necessary for collaborative inter-agency work are often not recognised.' The HSCL Scheme works in close collaboration with voluntary and statutory agencies in the community. This work cannot be left solely by schools to the HSCL Scheme. Principals, Parents' Associations and Boards of Management must also be involved, or, at the very least, be aware and supportive of the work of HSCL in this regard.

7.5   Recommendations

Arising from the research findings and from the literature, recommendations will be made under the following headings: policy; practice; and professional development.

7.5.1 Policy

7.5.1.1 <u>Policy at school level</u>

- Parent-school partnership must be strategically planned (Haynes and Ben Avie 1996, Krasnow 1990). It is therefore essential that parent-school partnership policies and plans are in place in schools.

- Parent-school partnership has different meanings in different contexts and, as borne out by the present research, has different meanings for different people. Bearing this in mind, the definition of parent-school partnership in the context of each particular school should be jointly decided by parents, teachers and management and this definition should be included in the policy document for the school.

- School policy documents on parent-school partnership should acknowledge the diversity of parents connected to the school, thus avoiding the risk of treating the parents as 'a homogeneous mass with a clearly defined set of common interests' (Gale 1996, 136).

- Policy documents should acknowledge the possible presence of power issues in home/school relations. Teachers and parents working together to draw up policy documents should be aware that teachers may have, 'by virtue of their location within an institution and their professional

knowledge, a built-in command over the relationship' (Vincent and Tomlinson 1997, 366).

- Bearing in mind families' 'fundamental role as the foundation for all learning' (Alexander 1996) and teachers' professional contribution to learning, policy documents should outline the complementary roles of parents and teachers in children's education.

- Parental partnership policy documents should outline, with due recognition of the local context, ways partnership with parents could be maximized. In a disadvantaged setting, policy documents should include strategies for the inclusion of parents whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage. Policy documents should acknowledge 'that some parents' involvement needs more nurturing and support than others' (Crozier 1997, 198).

- In all settings, policy documents should include strategies designed to maximize partnership with fathers, who are traditionally less likely to be involved than mothers (Vincent and Warren 1998, West, Noden and Edge 1998) and with parents of children in senior and middle classes, the latter parents being involved less frequently than parents of younger children (Department of Education and Science 2005a).

- Policy documents/school plans should provide clear guidelines for parental involvement for each type of involvement in Epstein's Typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991), in particular, for collaboration and exchanges with community organizations (Type 6), which was not included in parental understandings of partnership in the present study.

- With regard to Type 5, viz., involvement in decision-making, advocacy and governance, policy documents/plans should outline how parents will be helped to move into the decision-making role. The present research demonstrated that, following a process that saw them engaged in collaborative planning with school staff, parents viewed involvement in decision-making as a component of partnership. This constituted an important change in understanding as, prior to the action, involvement in decision-making was weakly identified as an understanding of partnership.

- It is essential that policy documents on parent-school partnership include the statutory requirements laid down by the Education Act, 1998, e.g., the promotion by the school of effective liaison with parents (Article 6g), the provision to parents of records relating to students' educational progress (Article 9g) and evaluation (Article 22:2b), the encouragement of the involvement of parents in their children's education (Article 23:2e) and the promotion of contact between the school, parents of students in the school and the community (Article 26:3). In addition, policy documents and school plans could usefully embody the guidelines provided by the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate (2003) document, *Looking at Our School: An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools*.

7.5.1.2 <u>Policy at national level</u>

- It is recommended that Department of Education and Science policy take cognizance of the necessity to allocate appropriate time to

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parent/teacher communication. The current time allocation for parent-teacher meetings (Department of Education and Science 2004) is too short for meaningful and constructive parent-teacher communication to take place.

- As has been noted, parents are now involved in policy making at school level. The current time allotted by the DES to policy making in schools is one day per year. Schools engage more frequently than this in policy making, necessitating the freeing of teachers from classroom duties and organising supervision for the classes of these teachers. This is sometimes necessarily an *ad hoc* arrangement when the opportunity presents. This militates against the successful, planned inclusion of parents in policy making. It is recommended that it be DES policy to make provision for additional structured time within the school year for policy making, such policy making to be inclusive of parental involvement.

- The model of parental involvement practised in the Home, School Community Liaison Scheme has proved to be successful in supporting marginalised parents and involving them in their children's education (Ryan 1995, Ryan 1999, Archer and Shortt 2003). Under the DEIS Action Plan (Department of Education and Science 2005), the involvement of parents is considered a key strategy in addressing educational disadvantage. It is recommended that the Home, School Community Liaison Scheme be maintained and strengthened. The present research identified areas in need of improvement, including parents' awareness of their right to be consulted, parental involvement

in decision-making and planning and the collaborative creation of a school environment supportive of learning.

- It is recommended that future Government policy be committed to the concept of broadening the remit of the HSCL Scheme to _all_ schools, with particular emphasis on schools with mixed socio-economic populations containing disadvantaged students as these latter schools are currently excluded from the Scheme.

7.5.2 Practice

Recommendations with reference to practice will be made using Epstein's Typology as headings.

7.5.2.1 Epstein's Type 1: Basic responsibilities of families

- The child is at the centre of the parent-teacher relationship (Keyes, not dated) and the present research indicated that, for 37% of the parents, partnership is important for reasons concerned with the child's welfare. Educational partnership occurs in both home and school settings. Parental involvement in education in the home should be acknowledged and celebrated by the school and rendered visible through, e.g., photographic displays and accounts of how parents contribute to their children's education at home. This would be particularly valuable in a disadvantaged setting where much of the work parents invest in their children's education remains low-profile and invisible (O'Brien and Flynn 2007).

- Home/school links should begin as soon as possible in the education of the child (Government of Ireland 1992).

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7.5.2.2 <u>Epstein's Type 2: Basic responsibilities of schools</u>

- It is recommended that parents, teachers and Boards of Management should jointly identify and list cooperation practices and strategies in current usage in the school. Taking Epstein's Typology as a framework, gaps in practice should be identified, leading to a revised list of practices that incorporates each of Epstein's involvement types.

- Schools should evaluate their practices of communicating with parents and identify effective communication strategies. In particular, the effectiveness of written communication should be evaluated. Parents should be involved in this evaluation.

- In disadvantaged settings, there should be flexibility around the timing and duration of parent-teacher meetings.

7.5.2.3 <u>Epstein's Type 3: Involvement at school</u>

- It is recommended that short-term (as well as long-term) parental involvement projects be included in school plans. Short-term projects may be easier to sustain and more inclusive than projects of longer duration.

- Parents should be assured that *all* pre-agreed involvement is welcome, whether of long or short duration.

- Parents should be assured that the school accepts that school involvement is not possible for some parents. Where parental involvement is not possible or does not occur, school staff should ensure that such non-involvement does not further disadvantage non-involved parents' children.

- Dedicated space in the school, e.g., a Parents' Room, should, where possible, be made available to facilitate parental involvement.

- As parents may be reluctant to attend involvement activities if they perceive them to be 'serious' or 'difficult,' it is recommended that initial involvement activities be as simple and parent-friendly as possible. This is especially important in a disadvantaged setting.

- Involvement activities must be meaningful and relevant for parents. If parents attend involvement activities and find them relevant, they may be likely to continue attending.

- Making sure that parents know other parents who will be involved is recommended as some parents lack confidence to come to events.

- Basing involvement activities on parents' interests is a sensible strategy.

- The importance of strategic planning for parental involvement is stressed in the literature (Comer and Haynes 1991, Haynes and Ben Avie 1996, Krasnow 1990). While it may not be possible to collaboratively plan all involvement activities, at least some involvement activities must be collaboratively planned, by parents and teachers, tailored to parents' needs.

- Invitations to attend involvement activities must outline exactly the nature of the proposed involvement as parents may not respond to vague invitations.

- Schools need to work with parents to identify the best times for involvement activities.

- In order to maximize the involvement of parents who have children in multiple schools, schools should network with neighbouring schools to arrange joint involvement activities.

- In order to maximize the involvement of parents who have younger children to care for, it is recommended that schools work with local agencies to identify/provide crèche/childminding facilities.

- Issues relating to involvement should be identified and addressed, where possible, at school level. These issues should encompass factors related both to parents and to the school because 'when home-school relationships are evaluated exclusively in terms of parental behavior, critical questions are neither asked nor answered' (Lareau 1997, 705).

- Parents should be made aware of beneficial outcomes accruing from partnership as this could prove to be a powerful motivator. This could be done verbally at general parent meetings. Displays on school corridors illustrating involvement activities and highlighting any beneficial outcomes, e.g., increased parental knowledge of curriculum, enhanced reading scores, increased parental networking and mutual support, parental and children's enjoyment of involvement activities, etc., would be useful also in this context. When parents believe that their own involvement is likely to make a difference, they may become more involved (Ames et al. 1993).

7.5.2.4 <u>Epstein's Type 4: Involvement in learning activities at home</u>

- Bearing in mind that parents may be willing to be involved in learning activities at home but may not know how, schools should clarify how

parents can help (Finders and Lewis 1994). An ideal opportunity for this clarification occurs where schools hold meetings at the start of the school year to outline the child's curriculum for the forthcoming year to parents. Clear information regarding the curriculum must be given by schools to parents and 'information must be given to families by the schools on how to help in productive ways at all grade levels' (Epstein 1992, 6). Programmes such as paired reading and *Maths for Fun* (Appendix XI) further provide school staff with opportunities to show parents how they can help.

- Courses on how best to help their children educationally should be put in place for parents. A 1995 evaluation of the HSCL Scheme found that, as a result of their involvement in courses, 'parents had increased in self-confidence, knew more about what was happening in school, and had learned how to help their children with schoolwork' (Ryan 1999, 31).

- Parents' attention should be drawn to techniques they may use to stimulate learning during informal activities at home (Becker and Epstein 1982).

7.5.2.5 <u>Epstein's Type 5: Involvement in decision-making, governance and advocacy</u>

- The present research demonstrates that parents may not be aware of their right to be consulted (Education Act, 1998) and their right to be involved in decision-making. Parents must be helped and facilitated to move into a decision-making role and to realise and understand their importance in this role. It is recommended that parents be involved first

- in activities and practices that they perceive as non-threatening. Having enjoyed the latter activities and found that their participation was useful and appreciated, parents may feel confident to move into the area of policy formation and collaborative decision-making.

- There should be flexibility in structures of Parents' Associations, in timings of meetings and the way in which the business of the meeting is conducted (MacGiolla Phádraig 2003). Furthermore, parental involvement in decision-making should not be seen to be restricted to membership of Parents' Associations or Boards of Management. Joint decision-making and collaborative planning can take place at different levels and in different contexts as the present research has demonstrated. Parents and teachers can, e.g., be involved in collaborative planning of classroom activities and activities to enhance children's learning or in collaborative development of the school plan.

- Efforts should be made to ensure that there is a turnover of parents involved in Parents' Associations and Boards of Management and that long-serving members of Parents' Associations and Boards of Management do not serve to disempower other parents and exclude them from membership of such bodies.

7.5.2.6 <u>Epstein's Type 6: Collaboration and exchanges with community organisations</u>

- In the present research, knowledge of the local community was a strength which parents brought to the partnership. Parental knowledge of the local community should be used to good effect by schools. Such

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knowledge may serve to enhance the teaching of the curriculum, as occurred in the present project, as well as to maximize opportunities for school staff to help parents and children avail of community resources.

- The HSCL Scheme provides a structure through which parents, pupils, school personnel and voluntary and statutory agencies can network and liaise. As such, it has an important role to play in delivering an integrated service to marginalised families. This element of the HSCL Scheme role should be emphasized and built upon, considering 'the need to address educational disadvantage by intervening as much with the systems surrounding children as with children themselves' (Cullen 2000, 8).

7.5.3   Professional development

It is recommended that professional development in the area of parent-school partnership be put in place both for practising teachers and student teachers. This development should include:

- course content on the legal and constitutional underpinnings of parent-school partnership;

- assistance in formulating parent-school partnership plans and policies;

- a broadening of the vision of parent-school partnership to encompass parental involvement at home;

- the provision of strategies in teacher training for partnership processes encompassing the different types in Epstein's Typology;

- the provision of strategies for teachers to involve parents in their children's literacy and numeracy as advocated by the DEIS Action Plan;

- the provision, in a disadvantaged setting, of some understanding of the reality of the lives of the parent population of the school;

- the provision of an understanding of the unique contributions of parents, as demonstrated in the case studies with parents in Chapter Six of the present research;

- the sharing of good practice relating to parental involvement.

It is further recommended that, through professional development, teachers' awareness of the beneficial outcomes of parent-school partnership be heightened and that teachers be made aware of the importance of their own involvement activities. Epstein (1995, 217) notes that 'teachers' practices to involve families are as or more important than family background variables such as race or ethnicity, social class, marital status, or mothers' work status for determining whether and how parents become involved in their children's education.

7.6 <u>Strengths and limitations of study and areas identified for future research</u>

Cohen and Manion (1984, 47) state that the sample used in action research is restricted and unrepresentative, that there is little or no control over independent variables and that the findings are not generalizable but usually restricted to the environment in which the research is carried out. This action research project was carried out in an urban primary school, with a

disadvantaged population, and the project findings are limited to the participating parents. The researcher does not claim that the findings can be generalized to other parent populations and other school settings. That is not to say that lessons cannot be learned from the project and it is hoped that educators and parents in other schools will find some useful strategies in the present research.

With regard to the pre-action phase of the research, a limitation is noted with regard to the research population involved. These parents were, for the most part, parents who are visible in the school. They were, to an extent, a biased sample in that they were willing to discuss partnership and confident enough to share their views. The study is limited by the fact that there is another cohort of parents, i.e., the less confident or the ones who rarely enter the school building, whose views are unrepresented in the present study.

The difficulty experienced at pre-action stage in getting the consent of parents to participate in individual interviews resulted in a further limitation. The necessarily cursory nature of some of the individual interviews precluded, in the case of some of these particular interviews, the acquisition of the 'rich data' (Maxwell 1996, 95) which may be available when interviews are pre-arranged and for a fixed time.

With regard to the use of the pre- and post-action interviews for the wider cohort of parents, there were limitations in that not all aspects of Epstein's Typology (Epstein and Dauber 1991) were addressed in rating questions, as

they were for the case study parents. A further limitation is that the views of the ten planning parents at post-action stage are compared with the pre-action views of all participating parents (i.e., 68 individual parents and 8 focus groups). This makes direct pre-action/post-action comparison difficult.

The use of open questions and the utilization of the semi-structured interview at pre-action stage can be regarded as a strength of the research, as valuable and unique data on parent-school partnership was thus acquired. There is, however, a possibility that the data produced may have been 'influenced by the presence, role, and perceived background' of the researcher in her role as principal (Litoselliti 2003, 5) and this is a limitation of the study.

This research was concerned with parents' and not teachers' perspectives. This limited the research as the 'shared' understanding of parent-teacher partnership comprised the views of just one half of the partnership, i.e., the parents. The research looked at both parental understandings and parental experiences of partnership. The data obtained constitutes a strength of the study in that the views and understandings of parents on parent-school partnership are rare in the literature. So too, indeed, are the views of teachers and this is an area that could usefully be addressed through research.

The parents involved in the main action spirals were self selected in that they all volunteered to take part in the action. They are likely to be 'the active, committed parents' referred to by OECD (1997, 16). We can say that, like the participating parents at pre-action stage, these parents may be viewed as a

biased sample and may be unlikely to be 'typical of the parents as a whole - or to represent their views' (OECD 1997, 16). This may be noted as a limitation of the study.

A further research weakness lies in the fact that there were parental involvement activities in place already for the parents of Second Class, one of the classes chosen for the research. This limited the number of parents available for the action research.

The main action spirals were well informed by the literature on action research; this can be viewed as a strength. A limitation is that, while several parents decided on the action, their decision was largely based on suggestions from the researcher, arising from the pre-action findings. However, a strength was that the actions were in key areas of Epstein's partnership types in need of development, viz., involvement and decision-making.

Arising from the findings in the main action spirals, the area of parental partnership in curricular planning could be usefully researched. Given the limited formal structures for parental partnership in decision-making, an exploration of varied and differentiated ways of giving parents a voice could also be explored.

This study as well as others (e.g., Moroney 1995) have highlighted the problem of poor parental attendance. The present research has also highlighted issues with the means of communicating events. In-depth research is needed to

provide an understanding of the factors influencing parental attendance as well as an explanation for the gendered nature of parental attendance.

This research sought to provide an understanding of how parents whose children may be at risk of educational disadvantage can be involved in parent-school partnership. A limitation of the study lies in the means available to identify such parents. In the present research the DES criteria for identifying children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage were used (Department of Education and Science 2005b). This had a limited value in that private details of parents' lives, e.g., their employment details or whether they hold a medical card, is not readily available to the researcher. This means that, while St. Mary's is included in the SSP (Department of Education and Science 2005) because a significant percentage of the pupil population fulfils the DES criteria for identifying children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage, the researcher is not able to state exactly how many parents in the relevant cohort of parents (i.e., Junior Infant and Second Class parents) are parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage. Moreover, 'families within any socio-economic group vary considerably' (Conaty 2002, 39) as does the performance of children at school. Research on the processes in the home and in the school resulting in such variations would be useful and interesting.

The use of Epstein's Typology in devising the interview for the case study parents and for analysing and interpreting the findings was helpful to the researcher and strengthened the research by providing a scaffold or framework both for the interview and for the analysis and interpretation. It also allowed the

researcher to identify areas for future research, e.g., the processes involved in Epstein's Type 1 involvement, viz., *basic responsibilities of families*; joint parent-teacher exploration of factors affecting involvement; and how parents and schools could collaborate to enhance community support for parents.

The inclusion of both quantitative (rating) questions and qualitative questions, based on Epstein's Typology, in the interview for the case study parents, allowed the interviewer to gain rich information regarding parents' ideas and suggestions. This constitutes a further strength of the study.

7.7   Conclusion

In conclusion, this research addressed three key questions relating to the meaning of parent-school partnership, to how parent-school partnership could be increased in an urban primary school and to how parents of children who may be at risk of educational disadvantage can be involved in parent-school partnership. The researcher was able to answer each question from the action research conducted, with the exploration of parent understandings a unique feature of the work. Another unique feature was the in-depth work with a sample of parents whose children may be most at risk of educational disadvantage, giving important insights into their unique and individual needs in relation to parent involvement. The use of Epstein's framework was particularly useful in identifying key aspects which need to be developed, with these parents.

It is earnestly hoped that this research will contribute in a small way to the collective knowledge on parent-school partnership. As we endeavour to nurture this partnership in our schools, let us not 'wait for the revolution' (Davies1990, 68). Let us, instead, take Davies's (1990, 68) advice:

> It is better to begin with some ideas that work and that can be achieved by ordinary people with reasonable effort … Shall we wait for the revolution? Certainly not. We can take small and affordable steps now that will be the building blocks for more profound transformation.

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Appendix I   **Letter of invitation to parents of Junior Infants and Second Class to participate in pre-action individual and focus group interviews**

School Address

Date

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am, at the moment, doing research on how parents and the school can work in partnership to help the children. This research is for a degree (Doctorate in Education) which I am doing with the University of Hull.

I am hoping to find out what parents feel about parent-school partnership. I will be including this information in a thesis for the degree. Others who are interested in the subject of parent-school partnership will be able to read about the findings from my research in the thesis.

I am very interested in hearing your views on parent-school partnership. I hope to interview parents both individually and as part of a group.

If you would like to come for an individual interview or to be part of a group interview, please let me know. I am usually on the ground floor of the school in the mornings and in the school yard at going-home time. I can also be contacted by phone at the school or through a note sent with your child.

In keeping with the procedures of the university, any person taking part in the research is promised confidentiality. The names of parents/guardians, children, teachers or anyone connected with the research will not be given, nor will the name of the school.

Kindest regards,

_____

Mary A. Healy (Principal)

Appendix II **Letter of invitation to parents of Junior Infants to attend meeting for the purpose of: (a) getting information on the Senior Infants curriculum; and (b) giving their views on parent-school partnership**

School Address

Date

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your child is now nearly at the end of his/her Junior Infant year and will be going into Senior Infants in September.

You are invited to a short meeting in the school to find out about your child's curriculum for next year.

At the meeting also, I am hoping to find out what parents think about parent-school partnership as I am, at the moment, doing research on how parents and the school can work in partnership to help the children. This research is for a degree (Doctorate in Education) which I am doing with the University of Hull.

I will be including this information in a thesis for the degree. Others who are interested in the subject of parent-school partnership will be able to read about the findings from my research in the thesis.

In keeping with the procedures of the university, any person taking part in the research is promised confidentiality. The names of parents/guardians, children, teachers or anyone connected with the research will not be given, nor will the name of the school.

The meeting for parents in your child's class will be on _____(day) at _____(time), in the Parents' Room. Hoping very much to see you there,

Kindest regards,

_____
Mary A. Healy (Principal)

Appendix III <u>**Letter of invitation to parents of Junior Infants and Second**</u>

<u>**Class to attend meeting to plan involvement activity**</u>

School Address

Date

Dear Parent/Guardian,

As you may be aware, I have been working with parents to find out more about how the school and the home can work together in partnership to help the children. We now have the views of many parents on parent-school partnership. This is part of research which I am doing for a degree (Doctorate in Education) with the University of Hull.

We now need to look at these views to see how we can increase parent-school partnership.

We hope to arrange an activity involving parents and children in your child's class.

You are invited to come to a meeting to plan for that activity. The meeting will be held in the Parents' Room on _____ (day) at _____ (time).

I will be writing about the involvement activity, as well as about the information we have already got on parent-school partnership, in a thesis for my research. Others who are interested in the subject of parent-school partnership will be able to read about the findings from my research in the thesis.

In keeping with the procedures of the university, any person taking part in the research is promised confidentiality. The names of parents/guardians, children, teachers or anyone connected with the research will not be given, nor will the name of the school.

Hoping very much to see you on _____,

Kindest regards,

_____
Mary A. Healy (Principal)

Appendix IV Information on School Planning
Excerpt from DES Circular 18/99: *School Development Planning at Primary*

Level

The Nature of School Development Planning
For some time there has been widespread acceptance among educationalists that collaborative school development planning is a powerful means of promoting school effectiveness and development. Increasingly, schools are actively engaging in on-going whole school planning in order to create optimum learning environments and to develop and implement the most appropriate curricular provision for their pupils.

School planning is essentially a process in which policy and plans evolve from the ever changing and developing needs of the school community. Since every school is unique in terms of its staffing, pupils, support structures, availability of resources etc. the strategies employed in school development planning will vary considerably from school to school. In all cases, however, school planning has as its essential purpose the promotion of school effectiveness and improvement, and it should involve the collaborative effort of all the school's partners.

Definition of Plan
The school plan is a statement of the educational philosophy of the school, its aims and how it proposes to achieve them. It deals with the total curriculum and with the organisation of all the school's resources, including staff, space, facilities, equipment, time and finance. It also includes the school's policies on a diverse range of administrative/organisational issues and, where appropriate, the school's strategies for implementing official guidelines/ circulars/ regulations. The school plan serves as a basis for the work of the school as a whole and for evaluating and reporting on whole school progress and development. The school plan deals with the setting of targets and specification of achievement objectives in the context of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in school.

The school plan is a written resource document, which facilitates co-ordinated development within the entire school community. Such a document can only be arrived at through a process of interactive and collaborative dialogue within the broader education community. School planning therefore is essentially a process in which school policy and plans evolve from the ongoing and developing needs of the school and the community it serves. It is a dynamic process, which provides for constant review, design, implementation and evaluation.

The Education Act 1998 requires that Boards of Management in a school shall prepare and regularly review and update the school plan. The Act also states that the school plan shall be prepared in accordance with such directions as may be given from time to time by the Minister in relation to school plans.

Appendix IV (Continued)   <u>Information on School Planning</u>

<u>Suggested Contents of a School Plan: From *Guidelines and Resources* (DES
School Development Planning Support, Primary 2005, 14-15)</u>

<u>Suggested Contents</u>
- General School Details
- Vision and Aims
- Organisational Policies
- Curriculum Plans
- Procedures and Practices
- Development Section

<u>Vision and Aims</u>
The Vision/Mission statement reflects the characteristic spirit of the school.
Consider:
- Inclusivity
- Equality
- Holistic development of the child
- Links with SPHE- climate, school, atmosphere…

<u>Organisational Policies 1</u>
Policies mentioned in legislation:
- Enrolment
- Health and Safety
- Code of Behaviour and Anti Bullying Policy
- Sexual Harassment
- Equality
- Access to Records
- Attendance
- Others, e.g. Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill
   Data Protection Amendment Act 2003

<u>Organisational Policies 2</u>
Policies supported by national guidelines:
- Learning Support
- RSE
- Substance Use
- Child Protection

<u>Organisational Policies 3</u>
Other possible policy areas e.g.:
- Administration of medicines
- Assessment
- Communications
- Homework
- ICT and Internet use
- Induction of new teachers

Appendix IV (Continued)   Information on School Planning
<u>Organisational Policies 3 (Continued)</u>
- Management of SNAs
- Special Needs
- Staff Development
- Record Keeping
- Other …

<u>Curriculum Plans</u>
For curricular areas a plan sets out the whole school approach to the teaching and learning of a particular subject and the management and organisation of that subject area including:
- Personnel
- Time
- Resources
- Staff development…

A curriculum plan is based on the policy for that subject as stated in the Primary Curriculum and outlines the:
- Rationale
- Aims
- Content
- Methodologies
- Assessment procedures
- Common approaches
- Linkage and integration
- Success criteria
- Roles
- Review/evaluation procedures

<u>Procedures and Practices 1</u>
- School organisation- teachers, ancillary staff
- Building, office, library, hall
- Car parking
- School transport
- Use of common areas in buildings and grounds
- School Calendar
- School security
- Visitors- sales reps., others
- Arrival and Dismissal
- Emergency closures
- Supervision duties
- Financial accountability
- Photocopying and Copyright issues
- Text book selection
- Book rental scheme
- Use of audio-visual and other equipment
- Use of Mobile Phones
- Healthy lunches/ Milk/meals schemes

Procedures and Practices 2
- Class and classroom allocation
- Keeping of class records and roll books
- Transfer of essential information
- Notification of absences - for teachers and children
- Parental involvement- meetings, assisting in the classroom, Parents Association, fundraising
- Staff meetings
- Updates- Circulars, Guidelines
- Reception of substitutes or student teachers
- Grievance procedure
- School Tours
- Extra curricular activities
- Promotion/marketing of commercial products
- Participation in competitions/festivals
- Contact with other schools
- Transition to Second Level
- Other…

Development Section
Maintain records of:
- Review- concerns
- Priorities
- Action plans
- Pilot projects
- Development plan (long term)
- Planning diary for the year

Appendix V **Excerpt from History Curriculum Document: Infants
(Department of Education and Science 1999b)**

Personal and Local History
An important emphasis is placed on the exploration of personal and family
history at this level. This type of activity enables the child to explore
thoroughly elements of his/her own past and that of his/her family, community
and locality. In this way the exploration of the past becomes of immediate
relevance for the child and important opportunities are provided for the
examination of a wide range of evidence.

The exploration of personal and family history provides excellent opportunities
for the development of historical understanding but some aspects of these
topics will require sensitive handling. In some cases schools may wish to
replace the units on family history with a study of the family of a person known
to the children.

Linkage and Integration
Much of the work suggested in the curriculum might be delivered through the
integrated themes which are commonly used to organise learning in infant
classes. For example, objectives in the strand units 'Myself' and 'My family'
might be achieved as children examine these themes in SPHE or religious
education. Similarly many of the stories used in language lessons or at story
time will provide opportunities for the development of simple historical skills
such as the discussion of sequences and the retelling of stories through oral
language, drama or art work. Information and communication technologies
may also be used in the telling and recording of stories and in the exploration
of the lives of people in the past.

Appendix VI Questionnaire to evaluate history walk

Dear Parent/Guardian,
We have had a very exciting development in the school in the last year as parents have been involved in planning events in the school for the children. We would now like to get feedback on one of those events, i.e., the history walk. I would be very grateful if you could fill in the enclosed questionnaire and return it to the school tomorrow. I will be including the findings in research I am doing for a degree (Doctorate in Education) with the University of Hull. This research will be presented in a thesis which can be read by others interested in parent-school partnership. Your views are very important both for this research and to help the group of parents involved in planning. Anonymity and confidentiality are assured.

Thank you,
Mary Anne Healy

1.   Did you take part in the history walk? Yes ☐   No ☐
2.   How did you hear about the walk? Please tick:

   Letter ☐   From other parent ☐   From teacher ☐

   Other ☐
   If you ticked <u>Other</u>, please say how you heard:

_____

_____

Please show how much you <u>agree or disagree </u>with the statements below.

Please tick <u>one </u>box for each statement.

3. The history walk with my child's class was enjoyable for me.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

4. The history walk with my child's class was enjoyable for my child.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

5. My child likes it when I take part in school activities.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

6. The history walk helped me learn about my child's history curriculum.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

7. It is important for parents to take part in activities in their child's school, if they can.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

8. The history walk was a good learning activity for the children.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

9. **I would like to take part in a similar activity in the future.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

10. **I would be willing to plan a similar activity with other parents in the future.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

11. The history walk helped me to get to know other parents.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

12. The history walk improved partnership between home and school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

13. Please list any way you think the activity could have been improved and add other comments if you wish.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix VII   <u>**Questionnaire to evaluate planning activities**</u>

Dear Parent,

I am continuing to write about our project in the thesis for my research with the University of Hull. I want to thank you for your very hard work and for the extremely valuable contribution you have made to increasing parent-school partnership in our school. Other parents and teachers in other schools will be able to read about our project in the thesis. This may help them as they try to increase partnership in their own schools.

Of course the school will not be mentioned by name nor will any parents' names be mentioned.

I would be very grateful indeed if you could complete the questionnaire below and return it to me at your convenience.

Thank you,

Mary Anne Healy

Please show how much you <u>agree or disagree </u>with the statements below.

Please tick <u>one </u>box for each statement.

1. Being involved in the planning group helped me learn more about my

    child's education.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

2. Being involved helped me learn more about my child's school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

3. Being involved made me feel that I had made an increased contribution to my child's education.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

4. Being involved made me feel that I had contributed to the education of children in the school besides my own.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

5. Being involved increased co-operation between home and school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

6. The activities increased partnership between home and school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

7. Being involved was an enjoyable experience for me.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

8. It is important for parents to be involved in planning.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

9. I would be willing to be involved in a similar planning activity in the future.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Please comment, if you wish, on your involvement in planning.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix VIII   **Excerpt from DEIS Action Plan (Department of Education and Science 2005, 56) regarding development of three-year action plans**

Planning at Individual School Level

The School Development Planning (SDP) initiative was launched in 1999 to support development planning in schools, with priority being given to the needs of the schools serving disadvantaged communities. Guidelines for school planning were made available to schools under the initiative. Progress on the initiative, since 1999, together with the challenges ahead, were outlined in the National Progress Report, published by the department in 2003. These challenges included the establishment of development planning as a cyclical process in all schools, the promotion of school self-evaluation as the basis for all development activities, the maintenance of a focus on teaching and learning and the increased inclusion of parents and other partners in the planning process.

A tailored planning template will be developed for implementation on a phased basis, through the School Development Planning initiative, in schools participating in the SSP. This will facilitate the development by schools of their own individual three-year action plans. School action plans will be developed on the basis of an assessment of the school's current situation, involving both self-evaluation by the school and the input of the Department's Inspectorate. The finalised plans will include locally developed targets under each of the agreed indicators. These targets will need to be agreed at whole-school level, with all staff members then taking them into account, as appropriate, in their individual short-term and long-term planning.

Appendix IX <u>Minutes of Policy Formation Sessions (Parental Involvement Policy)</u>

Session 1: 16th February, 2007

At the first policy-formation session, hopes/expectations for the pupils of the school were identified from the viewpoint of both parents and teachers. At this session also, the respective roles of parents and teachers in the children's education were identified.

Group divided into two groups   (1) Parents
                                      (2) Teachers

Group 1 discussed the question: What were your hopes/expectations for your children when you sent them to St. Mary's?

Parents hoped that:
• Children would develop good social skills.
• Children would be content and happy.
• Children would be educated to the best of their ability and school's ability.
• Children would be involved in a variety of activities.
• Children with weaknesses would be given particular help.
• Children would acquire good confidence.
• Children would respect themselves, their teachers, peers and the school
   uniform.
• Children would feel safe and secure and develop good friendships.

Group 2 discussed the question: What do you hope to achieve with the children that are in your care?
Teachers hoped that:
• A happy environment would be created to encourage good learning.
• Talents would be fostered and encouraged.
• Each child would be respected and valued as an individual.
• Many different teaching styles would be used to suit each child's learning
   abilities.
• Children would develop healthily, emotionally and physically.
• Children would be well prepared for the next stage in education.
• Children would develop self respect and there would be respect for
   teachers and peers.
• Creativity and imagination would be encouraged and developed.

Having considered these questions it was obvious that the aspirations of both groups were very similar and that they really are working towards the same goals.

The two groups then looked at their respective educational roles as parents and teachers. The feedback was as follows:

Parents:
• Bring children to library, introduce them to reading, teach them to respect books.
• Develop outside activities, e.g., swimming etc.
• Send children to preschool as preparation for Primary School.
• Teach right from wrong, by example and being a role model, e.g., keeping room tidy, how to look after the environment.
• Encourage healthy eating.
• Listen to and talk to children and help them develop their social skills.
• Provide a happy and a safe home environment.
• Encourage good timekeeping and have a good routine.
• Work with children at home, helping and encouraging them with homework.
• Get involved in school activities.
• Look for good communication with teachers.
 • Praise and encourage the children.

Teachers:
• Create a bright, colourful, happy, child friendly environment, provide a warm, well maintained building and create colourful displays of the work done by the children.
• Teach the curriculum appropriate to the age group of the children.
• Provide and resource material for special needs and access and update resources for children's education.
• Keep informed of changes and new approaches in education.
• Involve children in extra curricular activities.
• Listen respectfully to children and treat each child as an individual.
• Are role models for children.
• Are patient.
• Are good listeners.
• Teach and help the children to listen to each other and teach the children how to resolve conflict and anger.

Session 2:   2ⁿᵈ March, 2007

During Session 2, teachers and parents (a) considered the questions, *How do our roles overlap* and *How do we understand and respect each others' roles?* and; (b) considered the question, *What are your fears for the children when they come to school?*

Overlap of roles
• Both teachers and parents are concerned with the progress and development
  of the children and want to give all children the best of life's experience.
• Parents and teachers want children to perform as well as they can by helping
  them with their school work and leading them to develop good social skills.
• Parents and teachers want the children to learn and do well, building up good
  relationships in school and in the wider community.
 • Both parents and teachers agreed that it is most important to praise and
   encourage our children.

Understanding and respecting each others' roles
We understand and respect each others roles because:
• We know that openness on both sides develops understanding and respect.
• We know that good communication is the key and that this must be ongoing
  towards understanding when there are barriers.
• We know that we need to always see the human being behind the role.
• We understand that there must be understanding and fairness when dealing
  with children and their rights.

Parent fears

• Children might have trouble coping with adjustment from pre-school to
  primary school.
• Interaction with bigger group could be difficult.
• Racism and mixing with children of other nationalities might be an issue.
• Parents can worry about the safety of the children and perhaps wonder if they
  have chosen the right school for the child — will the best education be given
  and will there be choices?
• The child may bully or be bullied.
• The child may fall behind through a lack of resources.

Teacher fears

• Child may not settle into school and may seem isolated.
• Child may be bullied and this may not be noticed immediately.
• Children may suffer from a lack of resources for special needs.
• Children may carry parents' fear of school.
• Children may be subjected to peer pressure or may be in bad company
  resulting in problems in school-especially in 6th class.

Session 3:   14th March, 2007

During this session, parents and teachers considered how they work in co-operation and identified both present and future involvement activities.

Present involvement activities
• Paired Reading
• Maths for Fun.
• Parent/Teacher Meetings
• Plays/Concerts
• *Bridging the Gap*
• Outings/Tours
• Ensuring good school attendance
• Helping with homework
• Involvement in policy making
• Involvement in Board of Management
• Communication - Sending notes – Communication via homework journal
• Providing essentials-books etc.
• Invited groups coming to school.
• Involvement in the Sacraments

Suggested future involvement activities
• Sports Days.
• Easter Egg Hunt.
• Recruiting more parents.
• Parents assisting in class (certain subjects)
• Getting Dads involved.
• Parents sharing life experiences
• Cake Sale (raise funds for equipment etc.)
• Parental involvement in decision making — practical issues like uniform, swimming etc.
• Involvement in general housekeeping issues in school building

Session 4: 28th March, 2007

During the fourth session the role of the parents in school planning was considered. An analysis of current parent-teacher collaborative planning practices was carried out and areas in which future collaborative planning could take place were identified.

Present collaborative planning activities
• Preparation for the Sacraments
• Planning First Holy Communion Reception
• Planning and preparing games for *Maths for Fun* sessions
• Planning for *Bridging the Gap* sessions

• Planning through Parents' Association — Quiz Days, Fun Activities
• Involvement in Organisational Policy making — e.g., Code of Discipline, Anti-Bullying Policy, Retention Policy, Homework Policy, etc.

<u>Suggested future collaborative planning activities</u>
• Parents and children planning together with computers
• Planning Career Days
• Environmental planning, e.g., Green flag — Waste Management
• Upkeep of school grounds
• Planning in curricular areas

Session 5: 18th April, 2007

At this session, it was suggested that the Visual Arts would be the first subject area where parents might become involved in curricular planning.

<u>Suggestions of ways in which parents can be involved in the Visual Arts</u>
• Provide a simple box of art materials in the home e.g. paint, paper, ribbon, material etc.
• Compilation of list of suggestions for parents of some possible art activities.
• Looking at art books
• Making picture stories —make picture to match sentence
• Looking at art in the environment
• Looking at art in the school environment- yard, plants etc.
• Provide board in school for ideas
• Collecting and using everyday things from home to create art pieces
• Keeping samples of children's art in a folder
• Art student to talk on ideas for using materials etc.
• Visiting Art Gallery, College of Art
• Planning an art interest walk around the city.

It was decided to start with one of the suggested activities in the current school year, viz., art in the school environment. This was planned in two ways: (a) parental involvement in planting in the school grounds; and (b) parental involvement in creating a mural in the school grounds

Session 6: 25th April, 2007

At this, the final planning session, the draft policy was completed.

See Appendix X for Draft Policy Document.

Appendix X <u>Draft Parental Involvement Policy</u>

Policy Development
During the 2006/07 school year a group of parents and teachers met with a view to developing a Parental Involvement Policy.
Both parents and teachers reflected on their roles as educators.
They discussed their hopes and aspirations for the children in their care. It was obvious that the aspirations of both were very similar and that all were working towards the same goals.

Rationale for Parent-School Partnership
Parents are the primary educators of the children and teachers are full-time educators. Therefore parents and teachers need to work hand in hand.

The greater the interaction between home and school the greater the benefit to the child. Parents and teachers together must strive to reflect and enforce the same values, thus enabling the children to be fully supported in their education.

Policy Statement
The teachers aim to provide a caring, safe and secure environment where children can learn and develop to the best of their ability.
The parents wish to see the children grow in a warm, friendly environment where an encouraging educational system is in place and where respect and good communication are encouraged and where the child is valued as an individual.
Parents and teachers will work in partnership to create and provide a school environment that will promote the best learning opportunities for all the children and appropriate development opportunities for all members of the school community, including parents and staff.

The Parent-Teacher Relationship
As parents and teachers, we aim to promote openness on both sides, to develop understanding and respect.
We understand good communication to be of key importance.
We also understand that we need to see the human being behind the role of parent and teacher.

Development of Parent-Teacher Partnership
The development of parent-teacher partnership will be prioritised in the three-year plan. Partnership strategies will be developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated on a yearly basis.

Appendix XI <u>**Excerpt regarding Mathematics for Fun from *The Home, School, Community Liaison Scheme in Ireland: From Vision to Best Practice* (HSCL Coordinators 2005-2006, 50-51)**</u>

Rationale
The rationale for the Mathematics for Fun initiative is underwritten in the findings and recommendations of all recent research on mathematics carried out by or on behalf of the Department of Education and Science. Activity-based teaching and learning is central to the revised Primary School Curriculum (1999). The Evaluation Report on Curriculum Implementation recommended that in the teaching of mathematics teachers should provide opportunities for discussion, combined with the use of concrete materials by the pupils. This report also stated that the use of precise, concrete materials would result in effective teaching and learning, aimed at meeting the individual needs of the learner. The report recommended that schools promote purposeful parental involvement. Mathematics for Fun is readymade to meet these recommendations both at the primary level and in the junior cycle at the post-primary level. Furthermore, the dissemination of the good practice and positive outcome of the Mathematics for Fun programme, not only among designated schools served by HSCL but throughout the school system generally, addresses a central objective of the HSCL Scheme.

In the evaluation report *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools* the Inspectorate recommended that all pupils' learning in mathematics be facilitated by the extensive use of concrete materials. It further recommended that HSCL build on the proven success of initiatives to involve the parents of younger children, by extending these strategies to enable parents to engage effectively with the school as their children progress through the middle and senior classes. As Mathematics for Fun is practical, workable and non-threatening, it can address these recommendations.

An assessment of mathematical achievement conducted by the Educational Research Centre showed the difference between the performance of pupils from advantaged and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Recommendations based on the findings also emphasised the necessity for differentiated and activity-based learning.

The Mathematics for Fun collaborative learning initiative is designed and structured to address the following aims:

- To meet the individual needs of the pupils through hands-on work and parental involvement
- To enhance the parent-teacher partnership
- To help parents understand more fully the challenging nature of mathematics for the pupil as learner and the teacher as tutor.
- To break down the fear barrier some pupils may have towards mathematics by bringing fun and variety into the learning process

Appendix XI (Continued)

Rationale (Mathematics for Fun) (Continued)

- To help parents experience at first hand the working school environment.
- To empower parents to engage meaningfully in the learning process of young people

Process

Parents are invited to participate in Mathematics for Fun through personal contact by class teachers or HSCL coordinators or through home visits by coordinators.

In general, HSCL coordinators facilitate the parents' training, with some involvement by teachers where possible. Parents' training takes place in the school over four or five sessions, though this varies from school to school. These sessions afford parents and teachers the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the various activities, allowing them to build confidence, competence, and partnership. The activities used include tangrams and pattern blocks, aimed at developing spatial awareness; dominoes and the banker's game, aimed at developing number and computational skills; relational attribute blocks, aimed at developing language, logical thinking and problem-solving skills; clock bingo, to consolidate work done by class teachers on time; and pentominoes, aimed at developing problem-solving skills and the concept of tessellation. Many other games and activities are used in different schools, taking into account the varying abilities and ages of the pupils involved.

In general, Mathematics for Fun sessions take place in the classroom for one hour per week over a period of six weeks. Depending on the size of the class and the number of available parents, the class is divided into groups, with no more than four pupils in any group, if possible. A parent takes charge of a particular mathematical activity. They are familiar with the instructions and solutions. Children move from one activity to the next at a given signal. The class teacher is in the room, in a supportive capacity, while the HSCL coordinator oversees the process and meets the parents to review the session.

Appendix XII   <u>**Interview Questions for Case Study Parents**</u>

Question 1:   What do you see as your responsibilities as a parent, in relation to the school, to help your child?

Question 2:   How well do we and you co-operate to help your child? (Very well, Well, Not Sure, Poorly, Very Poorly)

Question 3:   What would help both us and you to co-operate more?

Question 4:   What special difficulties are there in co-operating, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Question 5:   What could be done to help co-operation between parents and school, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Question 6:   How well do we and you communicate, to help your child? (Very well, Well, Not Sure, Poorly, Very Poorly)

Question 7:   What could help us to communicate better?

Question 8:   What special challenges are there in communication, where there may be educational disadvantage?

Question 9:   What could be done to help communication between parents and school, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Question 10: How well do you feel you are involved with the school, to help your child? (Very well, Well, Not Sure, Poorly, Very Poorly)

Question 11: What could be done to help you to be more involved with the school, in helping your child?

Question 12: What special challenges are there in being involved, where there may be some educational disadvantage?

Question 13: What could be done to help with these challenges?

Question 14a: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to your child? (Very well, Well, Not Sure, Poorly, Very Poorly)

Question 14b: How well do we at school consult you for your views, and respect them in relation to wider school issues? (Very well, Well, Not Sure, Poorly, Very Poorly)

Question 15: What should we be doing to consult with you and listen to your views, with more respect?

Question 16: What special challenges are there in consulting and listening to the views of parents, when there may be some educational disadvantage?

Question 17: What could be done to help with these?

Question 18: How supported by the school and its wider community links and agencies do you feel? (Very well, Well, Not Sure, Poorly, Very Poorly)

Question 19: What should the school and its wider community agencies do to give you more support?

Question 20: What special needs might parents of children with some educational disadvantage have for such support?