PARENTS OPINIONS ON HOW PARENTS AND SCHOOLS CAN WORK TOGETHER
IN ORDER TO IMPROVE ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT FOR THEIR
CHILDREN.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Dr Joan Kiely at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

Signature: Aoife Kitson

Date: 2/6/2020
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Abstract

The aim of this research project is to determine the ways in which parents think that schools and parents can work together in order to achieve the best outcomes for children in relation to their oral language development. It was a multi-methods study, which used a survey to ascertain the views of parents of 126 junior and senior infant children on developing children’s oral language. The results of these surveys were then further investigated through the use of four semi-structured telephone interviews. The researcher analysed the data through a six step thematic coding approach and the findings show that the majority of parents believe that we could enhance children’s oral language skills through an increase in communication between school and home, some changes to the way in which teachers/schools assign homework, to allow for more oral based work. The importance of language and confidence in language as a tool for communication and giving the child voice also emerged as important from the findings. These findings were used by the researcher to make a number of recommendations for future practice and research. It is hoped that findings from this study will influence school policy and practice in relation to working with parents and supporting learning at school and at home.

Key Words: Oral language, Parental Involvement, voice, Primary Language Curriculum
Chapter 1  Introduction

Research Question and Area of Enquiry

The question examined in this thesis is - What are parents’ views on how schools and parents can work together to improve outcomes for children in the area of oral language development? This introductory chapter will outline the aims and objectives of the research project, and, discuss the background and rationale behind the study. It will then provide a brief outline of forthcoming chapters.

Aims and objectives.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the ways in which parents think schools and parents can work together in order to improve outcomes for their children in relation to oral language. It aims to examine the ways in which parents are already developing this skill for their children at home and aims to investigate the ways in which they think schools could support them in developing this particular area of their child’s literacy skills. The research will include an examination into how parents would feel about engaging in oral based homework and through what activities this could be used as a viable method for children to meet learning outcomes. The views of parents are sought on ways in which schools could support parents in a move towards more oral based homework, and ways in which this could be monitored. Anecdotal evidence (eg. Staff meetings, professional conversations at professional development events), seems to suggest that oral language homework is often neglected, which is unfortunate, given that some of the learning outcomes in the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (NCCA, 2019) could be supported and achieved through homework, as well as through classroom activities.
The objectives of this study include:

- Investigating what learning outcomes from the PLC could be achieved through homework
- Consider the ways in which parents are already developing oral language skills at home
- Investigate how teachers and schools can work with parents to ensure continuity of development of learning outcomes at home

**Background**

At the start of the school year, the researcher, a Senior Infant teacher, was engaged in a professional conversation with some colleagues around the topic of oral language and the PLC which was being introduced across Ireland. The general consensus amongst the teachers was that the standard of oral language had dropped amongst the infant children joining the school when compared to those that joined say 10 years ago. This issue was also raised at a Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) professional development training and day, where the facilitators confirmed that similar comments had been made in other schools. This perceived decline in oral language came despite the extension of the free preschool year being offered to include a second year of preschool education for children in the budget and well as the use of the Aistear framework (2009) in most infant classes. This discussion served as a catalyst to encourage the researcher to rethink the teaching of oral language and its relationship for language learning as well as the whole school policy used for developing oral language across the school. This coincided with a renewed interest oral language within Irish Primary Schools, as the PLC was being rolled out.
It is hoped that this study will offer parents an opportunity to become partners in the early stages of their child’s literacy development and that it will afford the researcher and her school an opportunity to meaningfully embrace parental involvement in their children’s oral language learning as well as developing an increased awareness amongst parents of the importance of developing literacy skills within the home environment.

**Rationale for the Study**

The rationale for addressing this question in 2020 is based on a number of factors, rooted in societal, policy and curriculum events over the last number of years in Ireland. The current Primary School Curriculum (PSC) in Ireland is over 20 years old. Ireland has seen major changes in both its society and its education system since its publication. We have gone from a society in which people emigrated to one in which inward migration was a key feature. We have experienced the rise and fall of our economy, the impact of which is still felt today. Two decades on from the publishing of the PSC, we now embrace different languages, cultures and religions in our classrooms and in our society. Our classrooms are now more culturally diverse than ever before (Ryan, 2015). The perspective of policy makers, educators and parents has changed. The PSC (1999) guidelines have been updated to reflect societal changes such as promoting our children’s mental wellbeing and embracing a holistic view of the learner beyond the curriculum and classroom (Mullen, 2017, p.1).

A new research-based language curriculum for Primary Schools in Ireland was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). This PLC (2019) replaced the curriculum for English and Gaeilge. It may be important to note that the NCCA places oral language at the heart of this language curriculum, just as it did in both of its predecessors. Thus, they decided to offer professional development for teachers in the area of oral language, before the other stands (reading/writing). The PLC is closely linked to the
Aistear framework (2009) which is an Early Childhood Framework. Although not yet compulsory, in schools, it is used in many Irish infant classrooms, including the researcher’s classroom. Both the PLC and Aistear emphasise the importance of play and of developing of reciprocal relationships between the teacher and the children in order to support language development (Kiely, 2015). In addition, they both recognise the role of the home and the importance of parental involvement (Kiely, 2015). Both Hill and Tyson (2009) and the Department of Education (DES, 2011) emphasise the beneficial nature of connections between parental support and literacy success. These benefits are also acknowledged by Nutbrown, Hannon and Morgan (2005) who state that “for most parents, it is intrinsically motivating to be involved in their children’s development- becoming a parent in the first place- and literacy is part of that development.” (p.23). It is widely acknowledged that parents are the child’s first educators and that their influence can have considerable implications for their child’s emergent literacy skills in the early years.

Changes have also been made to curriculum implementation as a result of the release of ‘National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020’ in 2010. This strategy aims to extend literacy instruction across all curricular areas (p.46), which result in additional time allocated to teaching literacy and numeracy. It was hoped that this would result in an increase in children’s overall literacy skills and in subject specific vocabulary. A report on Oral Language, *Oral Language in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)*, commissioned by NCCA (2012) states in relation to literacy that “adults (parents, caregivers, teachers) need to know what to teach and how to teach it” (p.30). These documents will all be relative to this study as it will investigate how we can encourage parents to develop their children’s oral language and at the same time discover how schools can provide support which will enable them to do so through working together.
Research question

The overarching question on which this study is based is as follows:

What are parents’ views on how schools and parents can work together to improve outcomes for children in the area of oral language development?

In order to guide and shape the investigation the following sub questions have been proposed.

1. How do parents see the role of oral language in their child’s development?
2. What are parents already doing to develop these skills at home?
3. How do parents feel that schools could support parents in developing their children’s language within the home?

Structure of Thesis

Chapter one sets out the aims and objectives of the study; chapter two will investigate some of the current literature surrounding oral language and its importance for overall literacy development, as well as discussing the policy and curricula which surrounds this. What the literature says about the importance of parental involvement in a child’s education is also discussed. This literature review will also investigate the importance that oral language is afforded within the Primary School Curriculum and Irish policies. Chapter Three, the methodology chapter, will outline the mechanism used to investigate the best way for schools and parents to work together to develop children’s learning in relation to oral language, from a parent’s perspective. It will deliberate over why qualitative methods were chosen for this study. Following distribution of the survey among the participants, and the follow up interviews, the findings will be comprehensively presented in Chapter Four, which also presents the analysis of such findings, along with an investigation into the extent through which they correlate, or not, with the literature findings. Finally, chapter five aims to provide
an all-encompassing synopsis detailing the findings of the research along with the possible implications of the study and recommendations emerging based on these findings.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has set the scene for the research study and has outlined both the rationale and aims of the research. The chapter has also indicated the format through which the research will proceed in investigating parents’ perceptions on how they can work in conjunction with schools to enhance oral language outcomes for their children. The research question will now form the basis of a trawl of relevant literature.
Chapter 2  Literature Review

Introduction

The previous chapter presented the context for this research study along with the research rationale and broad objectives of the study. This chapter aims to explore the current literature in the area of oral language and unearth some of the most common themes emanating from such studies. This study aims to investigate parents’ thoughts on how parents and schools can best work together to develop children’s oral language skills. This literature review will explore the importance of oral language development for children in our society. The review will also investigate what the literature says about supporting parents in order to enable them to work in conjunction with schools to best ensure the successful development of their children’s oral language skills. In doing so, policy and curriculum which surrounds oral language development for young children in Ireland will be investigated. Literature which examines the importance of oral language for children, not just in their literacy development but as an overall skill for participation in, and contribution to society, will be discussed. Relationships between the school and home environment for the child’s holistic development are also explored.

The role of the PLC (2019) is investigated. The PLC underpins and outlines all areas of oral language which will be targeted during the child’s education journey through primary school. A familiarity with this curriculum amongst parents may prove beneficial for them as they work to assist their child to develop the required skills.

The national strategy on Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life (2011-2020) was published as a response to the findings of the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, which found that literacy levels of children across Ireland had fallen from slightly above average to slightly below. It is a strategy which has influenced
the teaching of literacy in Ireland as well as paving the way for changes in teacher education across the state. For example, with the strategy came the provision of additional time for literacy across the curriculum, as well as an increased time frame for teacher training courses, extending a Bachelor of Education degree from three to four years, in order to allow for increased time for school-based experience for teachers in training. This, in turn, offers teachers and student teachers the best possible chance to be adequately prepared to implement both the PLC and PSC (1999). The strategy recognises the “vital role” that parental support can have on a child’s education. It suggests a number of ways in which parents and communities can combine to support children’s literacy and numeracy development (p.22).

The aim of the First 5 Strategy, published by the Irish government, was to improve quality of life for children, young babies and families in Ireland by providing a variety of supports to ensure children get the vital support required in all aspects of the first five years of their lives. For example, the Strategy prioritises play as a key learning strategy for children and it aims to empower parents to create playful early learning opportunities at home through shared book-reading with a free book scheme, and supporting local authorities by creating guidelines for planning and developing safe, child-friendly communities.

The benefits of a positive relationship between school and parent can have a huge impact on a child’s educational experience and outcome. Schools and school management play a huge role in the quality of these relationships and must aspire to create a school environment in which parents feel welcomed and that their contribution is valued, however big or small it may be. The implications of these relationships and the possible benefits which arise when parents and schools work together are investigated and the relevant literature is also critically examined. The review begins with looking at what the literature says about
oral language in relation to children and how oral language is represented in Irish policy and curriculum.

**Oral Language in policy and curriculum**

**Oral language in the PLC and Aistear**

Storch & Whitehurst (2002) say that oral language skills should be an “integral part of reading instruction” which often begins as early as preschool (p.944). Both the PLC (2019) and Aistear (2009) support the development of literacy skills in a child’s early years. There are many similarities between the PLC and the Aistear with both attributing significant importance to oral language development throughout. Aistear states that “the ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development” and that “communication helps children learn to think about and make sense of their world” (NCCA, 2009, p.12). Therefore, we as adults and educators have a responsibility to begin developing children’s oral language skills, on an informal basis, from as early as possible. The framework, which caters for children from birth, makes reference to the ways in which adults can support the development of children’s communication skills, from the very early stages such as through their facial expressions and body language (p.8) right through to a stage when they are ready to receive support for reading and writing (p.12). As stated in the PLC, “the teacher plays a critical role in organizing and providing a rich language-learning environment for children: modelling language, observing and tuning in to children’s language and literacy across a range of experiences and activities with different text genres” (NCCA, 2015, p.101). All children should be afforded the opportunity to experience a language rich environment and experience effective modelling of language prior to their arrival in a Junior Infant classroom, by which stage it is likely the child will have celebrated their fifth birthday.
While the PLC promotes learning through “appropriately playful experiences” (NCCA, 2019, p.18), in concurrence with this the Aistear framework also promotes enabling children to develop their language skills through play. Shanahan & Lonigan (2012) state that “children’s oral language skills serve as a foundation for both aspects of reading ability word reading and comprehension” (p.4). They say oral language is an “important predictor of later literacy skills” and that if we can assess and identify difficulties in this area that we can help prevent problems later on in the education system, by them doing so “educators are taking a proactive role in ensuring students meet or exceed standards” (p.4). Notably, this is also in the foreground of the Aistear Framework, where it is claimed that “the care and education that children receive from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influence their overall development” (NCCA, 2009, p.9).

The Aistear framework (2009) categorises types of play that children may engage in as it is implemented in their early education setting or classroom. Each of these types of play offer children an opportunity to develop their language and communication skills. Notably many also provide the opportunity for child - adult interactions as well as child-child. Games with rules allow children the opportunity to explain, question and negotiate these rules. Language play is cited in Aistear, as providing children with the opportunity to engage in unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of words and sounds. It states that “Children like playing with language – enjoying patterns, sounds and nonsense words” (NCCA, 2009, p.54) as well as highlighting the enjoyment children get from telling funny stories and jokes.

Pretend play, dramatic play and socio-dramatic play involve children using their imaginations, in these types of play “children use their developing language to move from thinking in the concrete to thinking in the abstract” (p54). These types of play also offer opportunities to tap into some other early literacy skills such as writing lists or messages whilst allowing for development of oral language skills. According to the Aistear guidelines
“Socio-dramatic play involves children playing with other children and/or adults. It provides opportunities for children to make friends, to negotiate with others, and to develop their communication skills. “This play helps to extend language” (NCCA, 2009, p.54). The ability to write stories also has its roots in socio-dramatic play. This relates to the work of Vygotsky and his theory of mind (1978). Play is a movement into the symbolic, and language itself is symbolic. Vygotsky credited oral speech “with the power of transforming the perception-driven concrete thinking of toddlers into the abstract symbolic thinking of school children and adults” (Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p.187).

When used as part of play-time, the socio-dramatic play area can also be used to help develop and extend language skills, through negotiations and interactions with peers/ adults. According to Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2011) the reason that children’s vocabulary develops so well during sociodramatic play is due to the children’s level of engagement and need for communication with one another in order to share their ideas with others. This is a common occurrence in a classroom with even the shyest of children engage with others whilst acting in a role or wearing a mask. In a support document which accompanies the PLC, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) says that during play children tend to “imitate language and literacy behaviours” that they have experienced in their own lives (2019). It includes examples of children using their oral language skills as part of activities such as taking/making phone calls, making appointments, writing lists, serving in shops etc. This allows the children the opportunity to relate their learning to their own experiences.

The first 5 strategy (2018).

The First 5 Strategy is the first ever cross departmental plan which aims to support babies, young children and their families. It is a ten-year plan which was unveiled in November
2018. It commits to significantly enhancing the lives of young people in Ireland. The strategy acknowledges the impact that the home and family can have on a child’s life. Within the strategy the importance of a good start, not just in educational terms but also for life, is acknowledged, as is the impact this time can potentially have on a child’s overall development. In discussing the strategy, the Taoiseach comments that “our children deserve the best start and opportunities in life to fulfil their potential” (Varadkar, 2019, p.7). The strategy refers to attachment theory and acknowledges the role of the parents in their child’s development and thus aims to enable parents to achieve a better life work balance by increasing the amount of parental leave available in a child’s early years. This move immediately creates the possibility for parents to enhance their relationship with their children as well as allowing them to spend more time with their children. This may in turn allow more time to be spent on educational activities such as homework and literacy activities. One vision of the strategy is to assist families in nurturing their babies and young children in order to support their development. This includes provisions for extra support for those who may require it, such as access to speech and language therapists. This vision also wants those providing services for babies, young children and their families to be well equipped to contribute positively to their learning, development, health and wellbeing of those in their care (p.21). The study has committed to increasing spending on the early years’ sector by as much as 117% in order to do this.

In its third objective this strategy refers to the impact families financial situation may have on a child’s outcomes and how childhood poverty may influence education attainment (p.52). This is something which is well documented within the research. It is supported by the work of Hart and Risley (1995) on their investigations into ‘The Thirty Million Word Gap’ which indicated that children’s vocabulary development can differ immensely between income groups. The study found between 86% and 98% of the words used by children by the
time they reached the age of three arose from words their parents used. Current literature highlights the crucially important role that parents play in ensuring children succeed in their learning. If schools can harness the skills that parents offer combined with what schools offer, it would seem that this would be a successful combination. Literature that looks at successful home-school relationships assert that parental involvement in a child’s education can have more of an impact on the child’s learning than factors such as social class, level of parental education or parental income (Jackson and Harbison, 2014). O’Toole (2016) comments upon the changes in parental attitudes and expectations of schools which concurs with Hornby and Lafaele’s (2011) conclusion that the traditional model with teacher as the expert and the parent as passive may no longer be acceptable to the majority of parents.

Similarities to Hart & Risley’s findings were found in the data collected in 2012 on DEIS schools in Ireland. It found that many children entering Junior Infants in Ireland had “language and vocabulary development that was significantly lower than the national average” (NEPS, 2015, p.22). The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2018–2022 and the Working Family Payment (WFP) are just two of the initiatives mentioned as ways in which this strategy is targeting this issue. It aims to build on existing supports, support the development of adequate housing developments and ensure the creation of development of physical and social infrastructure takes account of the needs and rights of babies, young children and their families in order to combat some of the issues raised.

In a response to the work of Hart & Risley, Fernald and Weisleder (2015) note that verbal engagement with children also varied within different socio-economic groups. They found that some working class families talked with their family as much as professionals and that in some cases families that were considered affluent talked as little as those from lower income groups. Questions may be raised about this link that is consistently made in the literature
between poor language and outcomes and socio-economic status. Hirsh-Pasek, Adamson, Bakeman, Tresch Owen, Golinkoff, Pace, Yust, and Suma (2015) found a variation in outcomes across all aspects of the curriculum in relation to over 60 families from different socio-economic backgrounds.

**Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life (2011-2020)**

The *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life (2011-2020)* is a national strategy which aims to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children and young people within the Irish education system. The strategy was released almost immediately after the 2009 PISA reading literacy results showed that Ireland had dropped from an above average to an average performing country in relation to literacy outcomes. In a critique of the strategy Murphy (2018) says that the targets of the plan are “almost exclusively focused on achievements in future PISA assessments (p.6) implying that this strategy will focus on getting these results back to where they once were. One of the keys aims of the strategy is to develop a public awareness of the importance of oral and written language in all its forms. Here it also references the need for improvements in the communication and oral-language competence of young children within their early years’ education (p.17). It acknowledges literacy development as a constantly developing skill and takes into consideration factors which may affect the development of this skill, such as the various linguistic settings within Irish schools. It raises, for what is possibly the first time in official policy, the point that “literacy was an ongoing issue spanning primary and post primary schools (Murphy, 2018, p.7). Murphy calls this recognition a “noteworthy milestone “in the context of literacy as a lifelong learning journey (p.7).

The strategy acknowledges the significant positive impact parents can have on their child’s educational achievement and aims to enable parents to further support and enhance
their child’s educational experience. The enhanced achievements a child can experience when their parents are involved in their education, through supporting and encouraging them is commented upon in the strategy (p.19). The argument is made that effective parental support for children not only enhances their development but possibly has potential to mitigate negative effects of low socio-economic status or low parental educational attainment (p.19). According to Berliner 2013, a child’s achievement is affected by outside of school factors three times more than in-school factors. This is important as Kiely (2017) points out “it does not label children from low SES backgrounds as being inherently less able than their high SES peers but points to the influence of structural factors instead (p.125). It aims to empower parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numerical development. In order to achieve this aim it has suggested that the provision of some online resources for parents, which would include suitable activities for developing oral language and literacy skills, may be beneficial. Examples of these resources which are available can be found on the NCCA website. They are categorised according to class levels within the primary school system, with the infant classes section including a tip sheet for playing with your child and an overview of the PSC. All the resources are user friendly and have a visually appealing layout. Simple language activities are included on the parents’ tip sheet for play, including telling jokes and practising tongue twisters. Reference is also made in this section to the importance of parents and schools working together, the benefits of which are discussed below in greater detail.

The National Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life Strategy refers to teachers and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners as “the most powerful resource that we have” (DES,2011,p.27) in our quest to develop children’s literacy skills and ensuring that they get as positive a beginning on their journey to life-long learning as possible. It states that teachers make a vital contribution to the acquisition of knowledge
for children and that as a workforce they must be treated accordingly. The literature states that the quality of a child’s preschool education can affect their chances of success in primary school and later in life; this is true for especially those who are risk of school failure (DES, 2011, p.27). Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998) conclude that “teachers must have a deep understanding of the what, the how, and the why of language and literacy” (p.284). They suggest giving teachers the opportunity to work with each other and visit each other’s classrooms as methods of professional development, not just during their early entry into the profession but throughout the entirety of their careers. They also allude to the importance of preschool teachers in promoting literacy, suggesting that “Programs that educate early childhood professionals should require mastery of information about the many kinds of knowledge and skills that can be acquired in the preschool years in preparation for reading achievement in school” (p.332). The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) introduced a free ECCE programme in order to allow all children equal access to this vital early education in 2010. Due to its success this has since been increased to two free years of early years’ education for children over three years of age. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) intends to improve teachers’ skills in the teaching, learning and assessment of literacy and to improve the skills of ECCE practitioners outside school settings. Included in the ‘actions’ section are plans to increase minimum qualification levels for early years practitioners; plans to ensure that training and education courses completed by those entering the ECCE workforce address all aspects of literacy development, and a reconfiguring of initial teacher training courses to include a greater emphasis on the teaching of literacy skills. Murphy (2018) says that this has “given literacy a stronger profile in initial teacher training programmes”, which may not have been the case without this strategy (p.8).
**Importance of Oral language development**

Oral language is the child’s first, most important, and most frequently used structured medium of communication (Cregan, 1998, p.7). Amorsen & Miller 2017 say that “strong oral language skills” combined with the capacity to communicate effectively provides “the foundation for learning in all curriculum areas” (p.24). According to O’Brien & Curtain (2018) “the importance of oral language development in schools is now more significant than ever” (p.67), “We learn through language and we communicate through language, so we need to teach it well” (Parikson, 2018, p.37). According to Parikson (2018), the responsibility lies with teachers to teach students the necessary vocabulary in order to allow them to have full access to subjects being taught. She says that teachers must “actively teach the academic language” (p.37). The significance of oral language is evident through the weight attributed to it, not only in the PLC (2019) but across our entire 1999 curriculum, and also in its predecessor, which was published in 1971. The PDST acknowledges this immense importance placed upon oral language development in its statement that “the development of oral language is given an importance as great as that of reading and writing, at every level, in the curriculum. It has an equal weighting with them in the integrated language process” (PDST, n.d, p.2). On the word of the PLC, the use of language enables children to engage emotionally, socially, cognitively, imaginatively and aesthetically in relationships and cultural experiences” (NCCA, 2019, p.6). It is also referred to as empowering “children to develop their thinking, expression, reflection, critique and empathy”, and supporting the development of their self-efficacy, identity and full participation in society. By building children’s oral language skills in the classroom, we are enabling them to fully access all curricular areas and in doing so provide them with the opportunity to communicate their ideas with peers, thus developing their ideas and facilitating learning from one another. The development of these skills facilitate discussions, and allow for problem solving within other
curricular areas, as well as providing the opportunity for children to engage in social interactions and peer learning, where appropriate. Despite this undeniable importance, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2010) inspectorate noted that in one sixth of English lessons observed teachers did not facilitate talk and discussion to support children’s learning (p.5).

According to Rafferty (2014) “it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of language development to all aspects of a child’s life. There is compelling evidence of the central role of communication and language as a key life skill” (p.10). The PLC emphasises its importance by saying that that “Language learning has significance for children’s learning across the curriculum. While children continue to learn and acquire language, they also learn through language” (NCCA,2019, p.7). Consequently, the importance of developing children’s literacy skills in their early years cannot be denied. It is these skills, upon which children build as they progress through the education system, which then allows them to gain full access to the curricula in a variety of subjects. As a result of the importance attributed to oral language in the literature, the NCCA also places oral language at the core of the PSC. It states in its introduction to the PSC that “oral language is accorded particular importance in the curriculum, as it is central to the development of the child’s general language ability” (NCCA, 1999, p.45). It also refers to in the “significant role” it plays in the development of a wide variety of skills such as comprehension, poetry and reading, (p.45). It states that Oral language is “seen as a powerful learning strategy in every curriculum area” and that “Oral language is a crucial factor in the development of the child’s cognitive abilities, and it facilitates the acquisition of social and communicative skills” (NCCA, 1999, p.45). Other research on oral language development has shown a link between vocabulary knowledge in the early years and reading comprehension in the primary grades (e.g. Cunningham &Stanovich, 1997; Scarborough, 2001). Raffety (2014) also claims that language and
communication underpin not just the educational development of a child but also their social and emotional development (p.11). Hence, teachers must consider and acknowledge the importance of giving children a good foundation for their literacy learning by teaching and developing skills such as oral language, vocabulary and comprehension at an age appropriate level from the very beginning of the child’s educational journey. These skills will subsequently allow the child to use language to influence behaviour/feelings/attitudes of others, get along with others, express individuality and personal feelings and give information as they progress through the education system contribute to society. The PLC draws attention to the interdependent nature of the curriculum strands. It also states that “each strand supports the development of the other; the oral language strand requires specific attention in the early years of primary school as it is fundamental to the development of reading, writing and learning across the curriculum” (NCCA, 2019, p.15).

Through building children’s oral language skills, we are enabling them to fully access all curricular areas and provide them with the opportunity to communicate their ideas with peers, thus developing their ideas and facilitating learning from one another. The PLC (2019) also points to the role oral language plays in children’s development of reading and writing skills. This can be seen in many ways in the classroom through discussion of what has been read, responding to poetry, preparing ideas for creative writing and or in teacher conferencing in relation to the editing of work. A report released by The National Institute for Literacy in the U.S. on Early Literacy points at oral language development as the “backbone of reading through vocabulary, discoursed and narrative” (Dickinson et al, 2009, p1). The NCCA report on Oral Language (2017) also echoes this in highlighting the importance of proficiency in oral language for the development of both reading and writing skills. It makes reference to oral language as a skill for life-long learning stating, “If children come to reading with a strong oral language base, they can build further on that base, establishing a
reciprocal relationship between oral language and reading” (p.225). According to some research, the level of a child’s oral language development may not be evident until they are in third or fourth class. The NCCA report (2012) on Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education says this is as a result of “the key role that decoding skills and understanding of individual word meanings plays in early reading development” (p.329).

According to Shanahan and Lonigan (2012) “Oral language development should be a central goal” in early education (p.5). This is due to the growing contribution it is considered to make in relation to reading comprehension, which is found to emerge later on in a child’s education, a contribution which is separate to the “important role played by alphabetic code” (p.5). The National Institute of Child and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care research network (2005) concurs with this and calls oral language skills “crucial” for development of children’s comprehension skills (p.529). It must be noted here however that there does appear to be conflict in the literature about the effect that oral language has on reading ability. Dickinson et al. (2003) refers to the links as a ‘direct relationship’, while in contrast Whitehurst & Lonigan, (1998) and Storch & Whitehurst (2001) appear to consider the relationship as ‘indirect’, with oral language skills influencing only decoding skills. However due to the difficult nature of assessing oral language and the number of possible variables (such as children’s ages/language disorders etc) which can arise in studies, it is difficult to prove that either is precise. It appears that this long running debate will continue into the future until there is a conclusive study carried out, with all variables accounted for.

The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) report (2009) highlights the importance of a well-developed vocabulary when learning to read (p15). Snell, Hindman & Waisk (2015) state that “book reading can serve as an important vehicle for developing vocabulary” (p568). Although they do make reference to the need for this to be combined with opportunities to
use the new words in conversations also. Snell et al. (2015) also mention dialogic reading as a method which “positively affects children’s vocabulary” (p.568) when compared to other types of story reading. Dialogic is a method of story reading which adults encourage children to talk about various aspects of the book through open-ended prompts, and through using their own opinion and experiences to discuss the story, with the ultimate goal of transferring control of the discussion to the child. It is a method of reading which “scaffolds children’s vocabulary and language development” according to the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (2015, p.97). When the child becomes familiar with a text the adult can then move beyond naming items in the picture and can begin to ask questions which are dialogic in nature and relate to the child’s own experiences and thus allow for the possibility of introducing new words to the child or perhaps expanding on words already known.

Pluijm, Gelderen and Kessels (2019) carried out an investigation into dialogic reading as a method of developing oral language skills in children of parents who have a lower level of education. Their findings are concurrent with Snell’s (2006) findings as in 50% of their studies it was found that dialogic story reading had a positive influence on oral language development. They also found dialogic story reading to have a positive effect on those whose parents had a higher level of education.

**Oral language and the home environment**

It is widely acknowledged across the literature that parents are children’s primary educators. This is not just in relation to their children’s oral language skills but is applicable to their overall literacy development. In fact, this acknowledgement of the importance to the role of parents appears to be one of the most agreed upon pre-requisites for effective education within educational literature. It would appear from the literature that the family environment,
and the quality and quantity of language within it, is now preceding that of the school environment in terms of importance for children’s language development (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Reese & Gallimore, 2000; Sénéchal, 2012). Weizman & Snow (2001) found that the quality of oral language used within the home is a key factor, not only for literacy development but also for school success. Based on this, it is no wonder that Pluijm, Gelderen and Kessels (2019) say “the richer the language used, the more children’s oral language will benefit from those conversations” (p.347) According to some literature, those parents who are less well educated themselves are less likely to provide their children with the kind of relationship that promotes the use of oral language with their children (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001, Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991). In opposition to this some researchers (Cregan, 2008; Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavit, 2014; Romaine, 1994) are of the view that that language styles and language registers differ amongst population and socio-economic groups and that it is the context that dictates the way in which language is used. All in all, it is a matter of difference in the way language is used rather than variation in quality. Cregan (2008) points out that that the language of home and language of school is experienced differently by some children and this can be disadvantageous for those children. The difference may lie in the more frequent use of decontextualized language in school (Newman, 2011). Newman (2011) highlighted the importance of children being able to use decontextualized language to speak about things which are not immediately present, a skill which needs to be modelled. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the introduction to the PSC (1999) refers to the role parents play in their children’s language as “crucial” (NCCA, 1999, p.19). Parents engaging in conversation with their children, is one of the most natural and informal ways for young children to be involved in language use and to learn by using it. Shanahan (2006) comments that young children’s vocabulary knowledge originates from oral language used at home. As Swain (2000) points out it is through the use of stimulating
questions and interactions from parents that elicit children’s oral language skills are stimulated and they then begin to express their thoughts in words. Taking the importance of the role of parents in their child’s education into consideration, it is vital that parents and schools work co-operatively in order to obtain the best possible outcomes for children in relation to their education. Schools also have a responsibility to create a relationship with parents that allows the two environments to work together and to complement one another in order to adequately prepare children for full participation in society. Based on current literature it would appear that schools find the best way to enhance relationships with parents is through a focus on positive relationships, welcoming ethos of school, varying of modes of communication, and bringing parents into school through informal means (Kiely, O’Toole, Haals-Brosnan, O’Brien, O’Keeffe & Dunne, 2019). Kiely et, al. (2019) found that although parents are aware of the importance of their role in their child’s life, they do not view themselves as significant educators (p.42). This is echoed in studies conducted by Lareau (2000) that found some parents that may be marginalised as a result of poverty believe that helping children with school work is beyond their level of expertise.

Both the PSC and Aistear emphasize the central role that adults play in enriching children’s learning and development. Many of the aims within Aistear’s (2009) communication strand make reference to children using language in partnership with an adult in order to expand their vocabulary (p35), for example it states that “You (the adult) have a key role in supporting my communication and language skills” (p.12). It emphasises the importance of parents/ adults talking to, listening to, and responding to children’s utterances (p.12). This is in addition to interpreting what they say and providing an opportunity for the children to “share experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others in all the ways that I can”. It also encourages parents/ adults to model effective communication and language skills (p.12), the importance of which may, at times, be overlooked or under-estimated. The Aistear
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framework draws attention to the need for a reciprocal relationship between the adult and the child, “sometimes the adult leads the learning and sometimes the child leads” (p.9). This can all be done, at an age appropriate level, within an educational setting or within the home learning environment. Following the child’s lead at times allows for the development of thoughts, ideas and opinions to which adults can then respond and develop as appropriate or offer support when a child is disengaged/ struggling to get started. The Aistear framework provides many learning experiences which schools, parents and care givers may find beneficial. In relation to this the PLC says “we know that the homes and communities of children play a key role in their language learning, which is developed through meaningful interactions with parents and extended family and friends” (p.8). It discusses the key role that parents have and how “language is co-constructed between the adult and child through joint attention, mutual interest and enjoyment” It states that language learning will take place as a result of meaningful interactions between the child and adult or child and child (NCCA, 2019, p.8).

In discussing playing games, such as football and trampolining, with their children Kiely et al. (2019) allude to the fact that some parents do “not attribute educational value to such play and did not recognise the importance for themselves as parents to support and sometimes get involved in such play”(p.45).Pluijm, Gelderen and Kessels (2019) suggest that we should encourage parents to use strategies/ play games that they can use within their daily family activities in order to prevent them having to spend extra time ‘working’ with their children. They mention talking to a child about what they like to eat most/ when they might eat it etc. De La Rie et al., (2016) allude to the point that parents may be more likely to engage if the activities are less time consuming and can be easily added into daily routines. This idea is also echoed in the NCCA report in its discussion on homework (Kiely et al, 2019). It concludes that including homework that coincides with children’s learning
dispositions and real-life interests, for example project homework, and P.E. homework has proved successful (p.338). Pluijm, Gelderen and Kessels (2019) also suggest that parents are more likely to engage in activities that do not necessitate the use of print. In some instances, this may be related to their own literacy levels and/or attitudes to literacy. This is a point that schools should be mindful of when creating policies around homework etc. Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, (1991) say that parents with lower levels of education tend to use more repetitive language with their children in comparison to those who have higher levels of education themselves. They encourage parents to develop their children’s literacy skills through informal learning, playing games and through encouraging the child’s natural sense of wonder. These are strategies which bear a striking resemblance to those used throughout the learning objectives of the PLC.

Pluijm, Gelderen and Kessels (2019) conclude their research by suggesting that a main goal for educators should be to support parents and enable them to facilitate their child as an equal discussion partner, which would lead to an enhancement of their child’s vocabulary, especially those parents who have received a lower level of education themselves or those who may have had a negative experience of the education system. As a result, these parents may not have the experience and skills to have thought provoking and vocabulary enhancing conversations with their children. Sheridan et al., (2011) makes reference to the strength of a teacher’s position for collaboration with such groups of parents which may allow them to assist parents in enhancing their child’s oral language skills. A curriculum support document which discusses “Talk Time” (NCCA) also makes reference to workshops which could be organised for parents, giving them the opportunity to gather in a relaxed environment and hear about how they can use oral language to strengthen their child’s oral language skills and would be in conjunction with the oral language topics being covered in school (p.5). Although, it must be noted that there is little research available on the tailoring of
family literacy interventions to target specific groups (Manz et al., 2010; Menheere & Hooge, 2010; Sénéchal, 2012) there are policies in place, such as those discussed above, which aim to target parents of children in the Irish educational system and support them in their efforts to support their children.

As a result of their study Kiely et al. (2019) discovered that the concept of what parental involvement is may differ between parents, and from school to school (p.3). This is consistent with findings in other literature (Harris and Robinson, 2016; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; Kavanagh, 2013; Robinson and Harris, 2014). Their report attributes this to the fact that parents are “not a homogenous” group (Kiely et al, 2019, p.8) and highlights that what may be considered by one as parental involvement may not be deemed as involvement to another. The participants of the aforementioned study did however appear to be in agreement on the importance of talking to children and having conversations with them as a way of developing their children’s language skills. It appears that the differences which exist amongst parents depend on a number of factors such as their own level of education, their own experiences in school, and their own ideas about education. O’Toole (2016) declares that parents ‘self-efficacy may be affected by their own level of education and their confidence regarding them having the necessary skills and knowledge to enable them to adequately support their children’s education. An example of this provided by Hornby and Lafaele (2011), it refers to parents that have not completed secondary school not having the confidence to help their child with school work once they reach secondary school.

It is clear from the literature that the importance of a strong relationship between parents and school cannot be denied, and that such a relationship can have an effect which remains with the child far beyond their primary school years. When asked, this relationship is also declared to be crucial by various groups of participants such as parents, children, and
principals (Kiely et al., 2019, p.117). Kiely et al. (2019) found that in order for successful relationships to be built approaches used should be sensitive, individualised and offer variety in the mode and frequency of involvement. It was also found that the ethos or feel of the school played an important part in parents feeling welcomed and valued within the school community (p.52). Factors which may influence a parent’s capacity to engage with or participate in school life may include: parents’ own educational experience and attainment, children’s special educational needs, socioeconomic status, language/culture. It is suggested that when implementing strategies to encourage parental involvement, engagement and partnership schools must recognise the different capacities, needs and availability of different families, and that a variety of options for involvement made be made in order to cater for all groups of parents that the school may have. Suggestions for ways to do this include holding some parent-teacher meetings during school, so that parents do not have adequate access to childcare can attend, or by allowing parents to communicate via digital media if necessary (Kiely et al., 2019, p.105).

Conclusion

Based on the available literature, it appears that all of the individual factors discussed above are interlinked and such literature has helped in the creation of policies which surround improving oral language development for the youngest members of our society. The sheer volume of literature which supports the importance of oral language development for children and importance of parental involvement in their child’s education is testament to its significance. This vast quantity of theoretical research is further supported by policies such as the First 5 strategy and the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and for Life strategy and through the entire 1999 PSC, the Aistear Framework and now through the introduction of the PLC also. The DES has a “strong belief that developing good literacy and numeracy skills
among all young people is fundamental to the life chances of each individual and essential to the quality and equity of Irish society” (DES, 2010, p.9). The concept of early childhood being a significant time for learning in a child’s life cannot be denied. It is during these vital early years that children must begin their journey of lifelong learning. According to the DES (2010) children “have an inherent capacity to learn from birth and the experiences they have in their homes and wider environment impact significantly on their development and future learning” (p.9).

Bartlett & Holland (2002) mention that “in the busy life of teachers, children, youth and adults, it is essential that physical and temporal space is carved out for real, effective, consolidated development of literacy” (p.20), meaning that in order for children to successfully develop these skills we must present them in real life contexts and provide adequate opportunities for children to experience and to engage in real life literacy activities. The NCCA report on *Literacy in Early and Primary Education* (2012) appeals to policymakers to ensure that the curriculum continues to recognise the long-term contributions of skills such as vocabulary and comprehension to later literacy development for our future generations (p.323).

With this in mind this study will explore the opinions of parents of children who are in the early stages of their primary school education on how through working together schools and parents can improve outcomes for children in the area of oral language development. In order to shape the research, the following questions will be explored:

1. What is already happening? How do parents see the role of oral language in their child’s development?

2. What are they doing at home?
How do parents feel that schools could support parents in developing their children’s language at home?
Chapter 3 Methodology

The previous chapter presented an in-depth and critical examination of the current literature regarding oral language and the relevant policies which underpin the development of oral language for the youngest members of our society. Using conclusions from the literature review as a basis for framing the research design, this chapter will outline the research methods used to examine the question of how parents feel that parents and schools can best work together in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for the development of children’s oral language skills. Finally, considerations given to the ethical parameters and limitations associated with this small-scale study will be listed and discussed.

This qualitative study was carried out using a multimethod approach. This included an online survey which used open-ended questions and was sent to participants electronically via Google Forms. As well as the survey, four semi-structured interviews were conducted. These were conducted via telephone with a small sample of the participants and aimed to further peruse common themes arising from the surveys. Bryman (2008) states that in recent times mixed methods “has taken on the more specific meaning of combining quantitative and qualitative research” (p.695) and traditionally a project using two methods would be known as mixed methods, however as my study involved two methods which both use open-ended questions and fall into the qualitative paradigm, this is deemed to be a multimethod approach. Hunter and Brewer (2003) refer to multimethod as “a strategy for overcoming each method’s weakness and limitations” (p.578). The use of both surveys and interviews will allow for the triangulation of results, as well as ensuring breadth and depth within the study. The data collected was analysed by extracting key themes from both the surveys and interviews. The issues of reflexivity, reliability and validity of the data generated were also addressed and are discussed within this chapter.
Research Method

The suitability of a range of methods of data collection was considered before the final method was determined. Consideration was given to a number of factors, such as, the limited time frame and relatively small-scale of this study. It was also important to consider the strategy that would capture the greatest amount of data, given the constraints outlined.

As the views of parents were at the forefront of the research, qualitative research was considered to be the most appropriate method to use. Creswell (2009) describes qualitative research as ‘a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem’ (p.4). According to Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest & Namey (2005) this type of research provides participants with the opportunity to express their opinion in their own words, rather than limiting them to a fixed set of responses as is the case in quantitative research. According to Bryman (2008), qualitative research “can be construed as a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather that quantification in the collection and analysis of data” (p.22). Qualitative research is exploratory; it seeks to gain insights from subjects into a topic. It tends to investigate opinions, motivations and underlying reasons. While in contrast, quantitative research has more of a numeric centre, focusing on quantifying those opinions and attitudes. In order to provide the participants with an opportunity to best express their opinions, feelings and ideas relating to schools and parents working together to improve oral language development, and after an in-depth discussion between the researcher and supervisor a multimethod approach was decided upon, combining an online survey with open-ended questions in conjunction with a small number of semi-structured interviews carried out in order to obtain the most valuable insights. In discussing the use of telephone interviews Sturman and Taggart (2006) state that the use of telephone interviews alongside surveys may be useful as a method of triangulation and data enrichment (p.133).
This data enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of how parents feel in relation to working with schools in order to develop their child’s oral language skills, as well as providing insight into the ways in which oral language skills were already being developed within the home environment, intentionally or perhaps unintentionally by parents/caregivers. A qualitative research approach should “support the use of open-ended questions as a way to express their own opinion and not forcing them to answer in a particular way” (Creswell, 2012, McNamara 1999).

**Data collection instruments**

**Surveys**

After careful consideration it appeared that conducting surveys was the most effective way to accrue a large amount of data related to the chosen research topic. These surveys, created in Google Forms, consisted of 14 open-ended questions which allowed for insight into the views of parents about schools and parents working together to develop their child’s oral language skills. The surveys were carefully designed with the content and layout organised in advance, incorporating questions that ‘adequately reflect what it is the researcher was trying to find out’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p.56). Attention was paid to the current literature surrounding oral language, its importance, its place in Irish policies and curriculum and the benefits of positive relationships between parents and schools when generating the questions. Careful consideration was given to the tone of the survey so as not to imply any bias by the researcher. It was imperative that educational jargon or terms that parents may not be familiar with were not included. Where this was not possible a brief explanation was provided, for example, in question five a brief outline of the terms was included in brackets after the question to ensure clarity. As the researcher sought to ensure as high a response rate as possible to the surveys adequate care was taken to ensure that the surveys were laid out in a
visually appealing manner which was not off-putting to participants. O’Leary (2014) says that questions should not cause problems for respondents, nor should they cause offence to anyone.

Given the relative ease of access to online platforms for many, and the regular use of them for parental communication in the school, the survey was produced and distributed online via email from the school office. The researcher was aware of potential difficulties that this method of distribution may pose for participants, however as this method is often used by the school it was not believed that this would cause any issues. It was made clear that although the school’s communication system was used to distribute the survey, the material did not represent the school; rather it was a study by an individual teacher and permission was sought and obtained by all the relevant bodies, including the Board of Management. It was outlined to participants that any queries were to be made directly to the researcher. Personal contact details were not given out in case they were used to make contact regarding any issue which was not related to the study, rather contact should be made through an appointment or by requesting a call back through the school office. Full participant consent was required before beginning the survey. Electronic copies of the surveys were considered to be a more convenient and environmentally friendly method of distribution than the traditional hard copy. It also eliminated the possibility of lost surveys/surveys which were not presented to parents within the timeframe. The survey was created using Google Forms which permitted participants to complete the survey on mobile, tablet or computer devices, see appendix C. Hill et, al. (2013) makes reference to the decline in response rates of surveys, stating that it appears that email provides researchers with a more accessible environment for carrying out research compared to physical or paper-based methods. As previously mentioned, Google forms was chosen as the vehicle for this survey due to parents already being familiar with using it as a method of communicating with the school. As well as this, it
aids the first step of data analysis, familiarisation with the data, (Clarke & Braun, 2013) through the way in which it lays out responses to each question in clear tables under the appropriate questions. As the researcher has already established a good relationship with many of the parents, this created potential for a high response rate with the surveys. The possible disadvantages of this pre-established relationship are mentioned and discussed below. An email outlining the details of the study, including steps taken to ensure confidentiality, that ethical approval had been given by MERC and by the board of management and why participation was important, was sent in advance of the survey. All responses came straight to the researcher’s Google account which was created specifically for the project and was password protected. No email addresses/ names or details of participants were visible on the returned surveys.

A pilot survey was distributed among a small sample of critical colleagues in order to identify any errors and ensure the final version best facilitated the research objectives. This pilot also allowed for an accurate time scale to be given to participants before they engaged with the survey because those piloting the survey informed the researcher on the time it took to complete it. Basit (2012) claims that a pilot study can be used as a method of enhancing “validity and reliability of the research” (p.73). It helps to ensures that the questions are not likely to be misinterpreted or misunderstood which gives a more accurate overall result. Some small changes were made to the survey as a result of the pilot study. These include correcting minor spelling mistakes, deleting an option (watching TV) which was repeated and the inclusion of a question to confirm that all participants had read and understood the accompanying email before they started the survey.

**Interviews**

According to McNamara (1999), interviews may be deemed useful as a follow-up with individual respondents after questionnaires, e.g., to further investigate their responses.
Hence, it was decided that conducting interviews in conjunction with the online surveys would be an effective way of amassing in-depth data about the research topic and would allow for further probing into the main ideas arising from the surveys. The small number of interviews allowed for valuable insights into the views and ideas of the research sample regarding schools and parents working together in order to improve outcomes for their children. In order to gather data, four parents were interviewed one male and three females. The participants were from a variety of backgrounds, but all had children attending Junior Infants in the same large school. It was decided that in order to achieve the best results the interviews would follow a semi-structured layout, with questions being prepared but allowing for flexibility in the order in which the questions could be asked and the addition of a new question if deemed appropriate (Denscombe, 2003). The interview schedule can be seen in Appendix E. Although the interviews were of a semi-structured nature they were carefully designed with consideration given to the content, layout and procedures organised in advance of the interviews, to ensure the incorporation of questions that ‘adequately reflect what it is the researcher was trying to find out’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.356). Initially it was anticipated that the interviews would be carried out on a face to face basis, however due to the changing circumstances in Ireland and schools closing amid a national pandemic they were carried out via telephone, and audio recorded using an I-pad. This appeared to be the only way in which the interviews could safely go ahead. One parent contacted did not feel comfortable participating in a telephone interview and therefore the interview did not go ahead. The disadvantages of telephone interviews are acknowledged by the researcher. Despite Rubin and Rubin (1995) stating that “in telephone interviews, all sorts of conversational cues are missing, making for difficult interviewing under the best of circumstances” (p.141), the researcher and supervisor still felt it was better to have them as a way or further probing data gathered in the surveys, as well as a method of triangulation. The interviews were also
piloted prior to them being carried out to ensure clarity and suitability of the questions. The necessary changes were made after this pilot was carried out, with the layout of some questions being refined as a result of the pilot. The time scale was reduced from twenty minutes to fifteen minutes. Other changes included the correction of minor spelling mistakes, and re-phrasing of question two. Recurring themes from the surveys were considered and discussed within the interviews, as a way of expanding on some of the data which arose multiple times. Prior to the interviews taking place, the participants were asked to read an information sheet and sign a consent form, which had been sent via email. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with transcription taking place as soon as possible after the initial interview to help with the accuracy of the data recorded. The transcriptions acted as a powerful tool for the production of data ‘enabling multi-sensory channels to be explored: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p.349), whilst also allowing participants the necessary freedom to ‘expand their ideas, explain their views and identify what they regard as the crucial factors’ (Denscombe, 2003, p.189).

**Ethics**

According to Alshenqeeti, (2014) “when it comes to dealing with human participants, research projects should rigorously follow ethical considerations” (p.44). A variety of strategies were used to ensure that this project was in line with common ethical principles. Before the commencement of this research project ethical approval was sought and granted from Marino Ethics in Research Committee (MERC). The school principal and Board of Management also granted permission for the research to be carried out (Appendix A).

**Informed consent.**

Cohen et, al. (2007) states that informed consent forms ‘the basis of an implicit contractual relationship between the researcher and the researched’ (p.55). Therefore, it was of vital
importance that informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the collection of any data related to the study. This applies to both surveys and interviews. Participants were informed that their participation was on a voluntary basis, according to Cohen et al. (2007) participants may be “strongly encouraged” to participate but the decision “whether to become involved and when to withdraw from the research is entirely theirs” (p.318). The details of the study, what participants were agreeing to by participating, their right to withdraw at any stage and how data will be stored was clearly explained to the participants before the research began or data was collected. This was achieved through the inclusion of an information letter with the survey link (See Appendix B) and the inclusion of a box which had to be ticked before proceeding to ensure that this was read, and consent was given before participation could begin. It was also achieved through the use of a plain language statement and informed consent form for participants in advance of the interviews (See Appendix D). Participants also verbally consented before beginning the interviews.

Confidentiality

As Cohen et al. (2007) informed us all participants have the right to privacy and this can be facilitated through a promise of confidentiality. In order to ensure that anonymity of the participants was kept no personal details were requested at any stage. Responses generated through Google forms did not contain any personal details which would identify the participant. This was guaranteed by ensuring the ‘collect email addresses’ setting was turned off in the Google forms, this prevents any email addresses becoming linked with the surveys and therefore ensuring confidentiality is maintained. Basit (2012) says that if “participants are anonymized then no matter how confidential or sensitive the data are, these will not lead to any harm or anguish to the participants” (p.62). Throughout the entire study, efforts were made to ensure the anonymity of participants. All electronic data collected was stored in a password encrypted file in the researchers Google account for the duration of the study and
for thirteen months after, in the event of it being required for grading purposes until this point. All irrelevant and unused material collected will be shredded/ deleted and disposed of on submission of this research project, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). The collection and storage of all data throughout this project was in line with GDPR regulations.

**Reliability/ Validity**

Reliability ‘refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions’ (Silverman, 2011, p.471). In other words, Silverman says that reliability comes from repeated agreement. He defines consistency as repetition of an observation, which then makes it more reliable. Additionally, the validity of the data generated must also be considered. As the researcher is a teacher in the school that the research was carried out in, it was important to be mindful of the possibility that parents may have been inclined to say what they felt was is the ‘right’ answer or what was what the researcher wanted to hear. Basit (2012) says that in an effort to impress the researcher participants may give “socially acceptable” answers (p.115). The importance of honest answers was emphasised in order to strengthen the reliability and validity of results, in conjunction with the guarantee of complete confidentiality for participants. The open-ended nature of the questions included in both the survey and the interviews ensured greater validity and reliability of the results as it allowed the participant the freedom to expand on answers if they felt the need to do so.

In order to enhance the reliability of the data gathered pilot surveys and interviews were carried out. This process afforded the researcher the opportunity to foresee any areas/questions which may cause difficulty or be misinterpreted and hence, to make the necessary changes. It also provided the opportunity to ensure the link worked correctly, the format was correct, the instructions were clear and allowed for the inclusion of a realistic
suggested time for completion of the survey. As mentioned above, minor spelling mistakes were corrected and the order of the questions was adjusted as a result of the piloting process. The participants were informed that they would be offered an opportunity to request a copy of the findings of the study on its completion (Basit, 2012). This not only reinforces the importance of their contribution but also provides a tangible purpose for the data being collected.

**Limitations**

As is the case with any study, there were a number of limitations to this study, which must be acknowledged and given adequate consideration. The fact that this was a small-scale study with limited participants and a narrow time-frame must be consideration when interpreting the findings. Issues that could have arisen included the change from planned face to face interviews to telephone interviews, not reaching an appropriate response rate of surveys, incomplete forms being returned and misinterpretation of the questions. The open-ended nature of the surveys may lead to “irrelevant and redundant information”, the risk of participants also leaving the question blank is high as they may not know what information is being sought if the question is to open ended. (Cohen et al., 2007, p.322). Also, the researcher’s position as a teacher in the school where the research was being carried out must be considered. In a discussion of the use of interviews in research studies, Basit (2012) claims that there is a “huge possibility of bias” (p.115), however he also makes reference to an experienced interviewer being able to minimise this through further probing participants or asking them to provide an example. This technique was used throughout the interviews where the opportunity presented itself.

Due to the unusual circumstances in Ireland at the time of writing, schools are closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic; a convenience sample was used for the interview selection. Schools were closed; therefore the researcher chose a selection of people from the sample and
made contact with them in relation to their participation in the interviews. The first to reply and that were happy to be interview over the phone were selected. Flexibility regarding the scheduling of the interviews was given great importance as an acknowledgement of the fact that the participants were giving up their time to assist with the research, in quite unprecedented times. The use of telephone interviews meant that the researcher may have missed facial expressions/gestures that would have been present had the interviews been of a face to face nature. In discussing telephone interviews Glogowska, Young & Lockyer (2010) refer to this possible loss of visual clues as a “potential difficulty” (p.18). They also draw attention to the possibility of respondents being distracted by other things around them while they are being interviewed. ‘The interviewer should establish an appropriate atmosphere through which his/her interviewees would feel more at ease and thus talk freely’ (Alshenqeti, 2014, p.41). With this in mind, it was important to ensure that the location used by the researcher was conducive to carrying out a telephone interview and that all necessary equipment was prepared and easily accessible.

The small sample size used in this study may also be considered as a limitation. The inclusion of parents exclusively from junior and senior infant classes in this school may have influenced the data. The school featured in the study is a large mixed school situated in a commuter-belt town. This sees parents who, for the most part, are employed in the city and engage in long daily commutes to work; often leaving them short on family time. Parents would be considered to be comfortably well off with high levels of education. Although the mechanisms through which the data was collected were carefully chosen and supported by the literature, the sample population is too small to extend the findings to the overall population of parents, therefore one must consider whether these issues be similarly shared by other parents in the wider population. The results may have varied if the parents surveyed/interviewed all had children in different schools or that had different experiences in a variety
of school settings. The results may also have differed if the parent cohort were from a marginalised group or a different cultural tradition or had negative experiences themselves of the education system.

**Reflexivity**

“Researchers need to practise reflexivity when writing up their research” (Basit, 2012, p.203). According to Basit (2012) reflexivity involves reflection and self-analysis and involves the researcher in examining any pre-conceived ideas that they may have regarding the subject being researched. In relation to this study, the researcher had to acknowledge the duality of their role as researcher and as a teacher in the school and that this may inadvertently have an influence on the data collected. According to Cohen et al. (2007) “the onus lies with the researcher to acknowledge and disclose themselves within their research and to understand their part and possible influence on the data collected” (p.171). The participants may have felt that there was a correct answer or an answer which one wanted to hear when answering questions in both the surveys and the interviews. In an attempt to prevent this, it was made clear to the participants that their opinion was valued and that they could speak truthfully and openly as the information provided would be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

Cohen et al. (2007) state that “a highly reflexive researcher will be deeply aware of the ways in which their ideas may shape the research process” (p.172). Therefore, it was essential throughout the process the researcher was mindful of her own ideas, experiences and knowledge in the area of education. It was the researchers aim throughout the study to render this an empowering process for all participants. As part of this study it was imperative that the researcher engaged in self-reflection on her passion for children’s oral language development and whether this may lead to a conscious or unconscious bias in relation to parents’ ability or willingness to support their children’s learning. This caused the researcher to reflect further on whether it is fair for teachers to colonise the lives of families by making
requests about how they might conduct themselves outside of school in order to support their children’s education.

**Conclusion**

This chapter clearly conveys the research process engaged in throughout this study. It sets out the rationales for and describes the research paradigms employed. The methodologies and data collection techniques used were extensively outlined and discussed, with acknowledgment of the limitations and ethical considerations associated with small-scale research studies included. Reliability and validity were addressed in terms of the overall dependability of the study. Attention was drawn to the measures undertaken to promote researcher reflexivity within the study. Following the investigation and analysis of responses from the participants, the findings will be presented and comprehensively explored in the next chapter.
Chapter 4  Findings, Data Analysis, and Discussion

This chapter examines the findings from data gathered through parent surveys and semi-structured telephone interviews. As mentioned previously, the main purpose of this study was to investigate parents’ ideas on how schools and parents can work together to ensure the best possible outcomes for their children in the area of oral language development. The study looked at how parents viewed the role of oral language as part of their child’s development. It also examined what was currently happening in homes in relation to oral language and finally, it investigated ways in which schools can support parents in developing their child’s oral language. The data appears to indicate that parents are seeking a reciprocal relationship between them and schools, and not one in which either party is in a position of power. This chapter will present and discuss the findings from the entire data set. Qualitative research methods, interviews and surveys, were used to explore parents’ ideas about school and parents working together. The four telephone interviews followed on from the survey and the questions asked were shaped by data generated from the surveys. Although surveys are typically used as an instrument in quantitative research, it qualifies for use as a qualitative instrument in this case due to the open-ended nature of the questions. Of the 126 surveys sent out to parents, 71 were returned. This is a response rate of 56%. A systematic six-phase process of thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2013) was used to analyse the data collected. From these three major themes were created. These themes and the process involved in arriving at these themes are discussed below and throughout this chapter. The analysis included was informed by insights gained from the literature review.

Six Phases of Thematic Analysis

A thematic approach to data analysis was used to examine the data gathered in this research project. According to Clarke and Braun (2013) thematic analysis is essentially a method for
identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data (p.120). In discussing thematic analysis, they describe it as a method which works well with both large and small data sets. The data set from this research project is considered to be a small data set. The six phases of thematic analysis in Clarke and Braun (2013) model are as follows: (1) Familiarisation with the data (2) Coding (3) Searching for themes (4) Reviewing themes (5) Defining and naming themes and (6) Writing up (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p.121). It should be noted that although this model lists and describes six phases, it is not necessarily a linear model. It is not the case that one cannot advance to the next phase with completing the prior phase (correctly); rather it should be that the analysis of the data is an iterative process.

**Stage 1 Familiarisation with the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 121)**

In this project the first phase of data analysis consisted of reading and re-reading the data in an effort to become familiar with it, initially on a question by question basis. As the results of the surveys informed the interviews, the analysis of the interviews was carried out separately to the surveys. However, the same process was used for both data sets. The use of Google forms helped in this stage as it automatically lists each response under the question for the researcher. This allowed the researcher to compile the responses into one document and allowed for analysis of the data question by question. The initial reading of the survey responses was completed with only 41 responses, with further reading carried out when the final responses were gathered. Any general observations were noted in the researcher’s journal at this stage, with an asterix marked beside the response on the printed result sheet. The data was then coded, a process described by Saldana (2009, as cited in Kiely, 2017) as “a judgement call since we bring our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions, and our quirks to the process” (p.7). In general the responses appeared to be honest and open, with many parents including everyday examples of using oral language with their children.
The same process was used for familiarisation of the interview data, with first stage involving reading and re-reading the data, after the answers had been complied into one document. The process of transcribing the data was helpful as the recordings were played many times during this process.

**Stage 2 Coding (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p.121).**

As per stage two of the Clarke and Braun (2013) model initial codes were then generated relevant to interesting features in the data. In order to create the codes, the researcher found any commonalities that existed in the responses. The questions on the survey were coded individually first and then put together to form larger categories. In a number of instances codes were banded together and renamed as a single code. For example, screen time and technology were put together as one single code. This code in turn was merged with the code ‘online programmes’ to form a category called ‘Use of Technology’. This included any references made to screen time, use of I-pads/tablets and the use of apps such as Bug Club which is used as a reading programme for children, with books often used for homework. Class Dojo also featured in the responses from parents, with references made to it as a method of communication between school and home. It allows parents to send messages to the teachers and vice versa, it also allows for parents to gain insight into goings on in their children’s classrooms. In order to prevent any blindness to one’s own data the researcher asked a colleague to read the data set and make some anecdotal notes after each question. This also allowed for triangulation of the data set. As a result of this, the researcher’s attention was brought to the significant contribution attributed by parents to the potential oral language has for building a child’s confidence, thus, giving them a way of expressing their own opinions on things. The significance of giving children voice becomes a resounding thread throughout the data.
Stage 3 Searching for themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p.121).

Following Clarke & Braun’s (2013) approach, stage three and four involve searching for common themes and reviewing these themes. At this stage, both data sets were combined. Categories were devised based on any commonalities which existed between codes. The surveys produced 59 different initial codes (See appendix F). These initial codes generated by the researcher were then divided into eight categories. These categories were named as can be seen below.

Description of Categories Devised from 59 Initial Codes (survey results)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description of Category Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Voice</td>
<td>How oral language exercises/games/activities give children a voice and allows them to express themselves. Overlaps with the child-led learning category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased communication with parents</td>
<td>Parents seek increased communication on how they can help their children, what is happening in school, requests for tips/extra information on what they can do to help their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skill development</td>
<td>Also overlaps with giving the child voice, teaching children basic skills such as listening skills, eye contact but also giving them confidence to share their opinions/thoughts with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-led learning</td>
<td>Use of child-led learning, giving children choice in their learning,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Includes suggestions made by parents about changes to homework, opportunities for oral language homework and the role of homework in their child’s overall development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of oral language to help overall learning</td>
<td>Parents’ comments on how they use oral language to help develop their children’s overall learning, in relation to literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints on parents’ time</td>
<td>Comments made about lack of time, parents and children’s busy schedules and how oral language development fits into this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Technology</td>
<td>Includes parents’ comments around screen time, use of apps/online programmes used by children/teachers as part of homework and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the positive use of apps for communication between teachers and parents.

**Stage 4 Reviewing themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p.121).**

Following on from the individual analysis of the data by categories, the researcher sought to “put together the issues rising across the individuals” (Cohen et al., 2011, p.551) in order to compare responses and to get an overall summary of the data. The data was then reanalysed and all relevant comments were gathered. Any further data that emerged at this stage was added. Some small adjustments were made to the titles of the categories listed above.

**Stage 5 Defining and naming themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p.121).**

This stage involves the researcher bringing together all categories identified and conducting a deeper analysis of each theme across the data sources. Eventually three over-arching themes were identified. These are as follows (1) Oral language and homework (2) Voice of the child and (3) Communication.

**Stage 6 “Writing up” (Clarke & Braun 2013, p.121).**

This section will present, analyse and discuss the themes that emerged from a comprehensive analysis of the data. The researcher identified three main themes in her research and these themes will be discussed later on in the chapter. While overlap across the themes may exist, each theme will be addressed separately in order to provide a clearer account. Any sub-themes of these overarching themes are also outlined and discussed below. Each of the themes and sub-themes listed can be directly linked to what the research project set out to explore.
Summary of Results from Survey

The survey was employed as a vehicle to establish the views of parents on how schools and parents can work together to improve outcomes for children in relation to Oral language. The findings of these surveys were used to frame the questions for the follow up interviews. In other words, the telephone interviews were used to get more information or to go deeper into points raised in the feedback from the survey. Surveys were sent to parents of children in Junior and senior infants, with seventy-one responses included in the overall analysis.

➢ Question 1- Looked at activities the parents are already engaged in at home to promote oral language development. A list of suggested activities was provided. The most popular options chosen were reading books and playing together; the least popular were compiling shopping lists and practising religious rituals together.

➢ Question 2- This question asked parents to reflect on the amount of times a day they have informal conversations with their children. An overwhelming number of parents responded with “several times a day”. Indicating informal exposure to language is happening repeatedly within the home.

➢ Question 3- This questioned looked for respondents’ opinions on the best time, if any, for having an informal conversation with their children, the responses indicated that the best informal conversations happen when the child is relaxed and free from distractions, which is often before bed or during meal times.

➢ Question 4- This question examined why respondents feel that having conversations is important. The power of these informal chats for vocabulary development and giving the child the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions were at the forefront of the responses.

➢ Question 5- This question addressed the importance of informal conversations for literacy development and overall development. Common answers included the
benefits of an improved vocabulary for reading/writing. Social skills and listening skills also appeared frequently in the responses. This highlights parents’ awareness of the role oral language plays in overall literacy development.

➢ Question 6- Here parents were asked for ways in which schools can help support parents in developing their child’s language skills. There were lots of suggestions offered; the overall consensus appears to be that an increase in communication would empower parents in further developing oral language for their children. Bug Club (an online reading programme) was mentioned as a useful tool for initiating conversations and providing opportunities for vocabulary development.

➢ Question 7- This question investigated the difference between oral language development at home and in school. Many references were made to the subject of the conversations and how it may differ at home, with the child one to-one with the adult, rather than the adult dividing their attention between the thirty children in the class.

➢ Question 8- Looked at different activities that parents would be willing to engage in if they were sent home for homework. Again, reading stories proved popular, with telling jokes/stories, playing language games and interviews with friends/family also proving popular.

➢ Question 9- This questioned offered parents the opportunity to discuss any challenges that they face in relation to oral language development at home. Children being tired/not interested/lacking attention were the most common challenges. Several parents said they weren’t experiencing any challenges, with one parent stating that “We are very lucky and are enjoying this journey of developing his literacy. So far, we have not come across any challenges as such”, which is extremely positive.

➢ Question 10- Looked at the relationship between parents and the school, with the majority of these being very positive. Although one did state that the relationship was
“not what I expected. I thought it would be more collaborative”. This may indicate that this parent is willing to collaborate with the school in relation to his child and that they feel this is not being reciprocated.

➢ Question 11-Looks at how often parents visit the school. It indicates that most parents just drop off and collect their children and only go into the school for organised events such as plays, parent-teacher meetings and Grandparents Day. The message shining through here is that parents are happy to visit schools, but only when invited to do so. This is consistent with the findings of Kiely et al. (2019) that bringing parents into schools for an informal visit can enhance relationships.

➢ Question 12- This question offered parents the opportunity to include their thoughts on how schools can support parents to become more involved in their child’s learning. The responses offer lots of good suggestions. Many of these refer to an increase in communication between school and home. Other suggestions include “by being invited into the class more”, “Help sheets or parent information hour” and “continue to promote small exercises like reading time with your child so the child is enthused when they are asked to continue at home. Interestingly one parent’s response to this question was “Parents have to do it for themselves or else they may resent being told what to do by school”. This comment implies that parents do not want schools/teachers to be in control of their child’s learning, or to be dictating what they should be doing. This comment highlights parents’ awareness of their role as equal partners with teachers in guiding their children’s learning.

➢ Question 13- This question offered some suggestions of things that the school could offer to parents in order to help them with developing their child’s literacy skills. The most popular option was a tip sheet with information for parents. Oral language homework and games sent home, followed closely. Interestingly, the least popular
was the opportunity to hear from an oral language expert. This indicates that parents do not feel that hearing from an expert would be beneficial. They consider themselves to be sufficiently educated and, in a position, to create meaningful learning opportunities for their children, without input from an expert. This relates to the findings of O’Toole (2006) and Hornby and Lafaele’s (2011) that parents are no longer satisfied with the traditional method where the parent is passive and the teacher is the expert. It further develops the point made in question 12, where the idea of parents “having to do it for themselves” was highlighted. Parents want to be active participants in their own children’s education.

➢ Question 14- The final question in the survey allowed parents to add any additional comments they had. These are discussed below.

‘Open Responses’ Section of the survey

The final question in the survey offered the parents the chance to add any other comments/ideas or to include any other suggestions that they had not yet had a chance to express. Some of the typical responses included the following: -

- “Stress the importance of talking to your child and how screen time should be limited as too much definitely has an impact on oral language/vocabulary skills”. This comment hints at the benefits of conversations for emotional and social skills development as well as oral language.

- “More workshops and talks on children’s development in general would be great”. This is noteworthy as some parents have previously ruled out the idea of talks from an expert in relation to oral language yet here another parent suggests having talks on children’s development. Perhaps the feeling is that this would be of a more general overview and less
instructional and obtrusive for them. It would not take away their autonomy in relation to their child’s education rather it would provide them with the tools to ensure progression.

-Several comments were made about homework

- The “lack of variety” within homework given.
- How it “can at times limit time available to parents for reading stories playing oral language games”. This raises an interesting point. The new PLC (2019) is designed with the focus on developing oral language skills through appropriately playful experiences and yet parents are being prevented from being able to do this at home as a result of other types of homework being assigned. This indicates that there should be space to include parents and children in decisions surrounding the type of homework assigned. Through giving children agency and involving them in the decision-making process we could ensure parents had sufficient time to play games and read stories.

- “Games are a good idea so the children are learning through fun”.
- “I guess homework could have some element of role play where the child/parent can interact using scripted scenes”. Again, indicating a desire for parents to be involved in educating their child.
- “Less written homework and more oral assignments, such as interviews and oral reports”.

**Summary of Results from interviews**

- Question 1- This question looked at the need for increased communication between school and home. All parents concurred with this idea, with one stating that they hadn’t spoken to their child’s teacher since parent teacher meetings (November). One parent showed her commitment to becoming
involved in her child’s education by stating that she had bought a book to help her with the Jolly Phonics programme when her child was in junior infants. Another commented that they “don’t want to be bombarded with information” and suggested “a newsletter every fortnight”. Again, this highlights the parents longing to be involved in their child’s education but not to a point where the relationship becomes one sided and school are preaching to parents. It appears that this parent in particular wants to find the right balance on this issue. A fortnightly newsletter would provide a sufficient platform for increased communication without being a drain on parent’s already limited time and resources.

➢ Question 2- This question proposed a move towards more oral based homework and was received quite well by all participants. The idea of accountability was discussed with all parents saying they would engage with oral homework and that they like the flexibility it would give, lending itself to the possibility of being done in the car or while a sibling was at dancing class. The messages coming through on this topic are encouraging and again highlight parent’s desire for autonomy and agency.

➢ Question 3- This question looked at the challenge that arose from children having too much screen time. It appears that the general consensus is that screen time poses a significant challenge for parents in relation to oral language. Parents don’t appear to be familiar with apps/games that could be used to improve oral language and the idea of schools creating a list of beneficial apps for parents was proposed.

➢ Question 4- This question arose from the suggestion by three parents in the survey that teaching children is up to teachers and is not the parents’
responsibility. One parent strongly disagreed with this, stating “I think the teachers assists us with teaching our own children, and we never stop learning even from our children and them from us”. While another said that “I kind of forget that language is a part of school. I always think of school like is more to do with the reading and writing side of it.

Suggesting that parents are engaging in oral language with their children in meaningful ways without even being aware of it. It is happening naturally in the home and these skills are already being developed in an informal way before the child comes to school. Perhaps this is another explanation for why parents do not feel it is necessary to hear from an expert in relation to this aspect of literacy development.

➢ Question 5- This question was included to examine current practices going on in homes while schools are closed. It appears that parents are finding the unusual circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic overwhelming, but that the situation is allowing additional informal conversations in the home due to increased time available. One parent alluded to an increased amount of phone calls between their child and relations in these new circumstances.

➢ Question 6- This question gave parents the opportunity to add some questions/ comments. Two parents used it as an opportunity to look for recommendations for resources/ ways in which they can support their child’s oral language development. A variety of apps and games were suggested with the possibility of a document being drawn up for parents after the study is finished.
Key findings from the data

Some of the key findings of the full data set are as follows:

- Communication- parents appreciate the value of oral language skills for children’s communication skills. It is widely acknowledged amongst parents that by developing these skills in their children’s early years that they are enabling their child to express themselves and give them a voice.

- Communication- parents believe their children’s learning would benefit from increased communication between home and school, so that parents are in a better position to assist with and ensure continued development of the skills being taught in school. This may also ensure continuity of teaching in areas such as phonics/ maths. Parents believe that a tip sheets regarding developing oral language would be beneficial for them.

- Oral language and homework- It appears based on the data, that homework can be a source of stress, with parents referring to frustration and negativity surrounding work given to be completed at home. All parents appear to believe the inclusion of oral based homework would be beneficial and would be completed to a high standard if expectations were made clear and parents were sure what was exactly the purpose of the activity is. Parents want to be involved in their children’s education but they went teachers to empower them to do so and to provide them with the necessary tools to ensure their child’s progression.
Discussion of findings

Theme 1: Oral language and homework

Possible Changes

It was found by a 2014 Irish study that parents welcomed homework for “ensuring parental involvement in their child’s learning” (Jackson & Harbison, 2014, p.54). The results of data collected by this study echo those findings and offer a resounding yes to the question of a move towards oral based homework for their children. The idea of teachers assessing oral-based homework and informing parents of what was required on their end in order to facilitate the completion of oral homework were discussed in detail in one of the participant interviews, concluding that if the requirements were made clear that this would be an appropriate and welcomed method of homework, in particular in the latter end of a child’s education, as it is felt that her younger children currently enjoy engagement with homework. The idea of this being less formal and having potential to be completed in the car or away from the formal homework setting was looked upon favourably. This relates to comments made by De La Rie (2016) about when homework is less time consuming parents are more likely to engage. When given the opportunity to add comments regarding schools and parents working together for better overall language outcomes for children, some suggestions from parents included “less written homework and more oral assignments”, the inclusion of “games so they are learning through fun” and “homework with some element of role play where the parent and child can interact”. When discussing the introduction of oral based homework, no parents disagreed with the idea, or expressed concerns about its introduction. However, if a move like this was to take place, it is clear that guidance would need to be provided for both children and parents, with expectations made clear from the start, in order for the targeted learning outcomes to be achieved. This is a point which is raised on several occasions in the data. The message coming through here is that although parents want to be
involved and are willing to engage with their children’s learning they also want to ensure that the work they are doing is beneficial. They indicate that they may need guidance to ensure the learning outcomes are successfully met. This provides an opportunity for the reciprocal relationship to come into play. When asked to choose from a list of suggestions for oral based homework that they would be likely to engage in, parents chose reading stories and interviewing family members, also looking favourably upon the idea of language games and jokes/stories. It is clear from responses like this that parents are willing to engage in meaningful oral language activities with their children. By interviewing family members, the child is developing their knowledge of family and social history as well as their relationship with family members. In addition to this, history is being brought alive for the child by this process. This focus on oral work would help with a challenge which was listed stating that “when it is framed as homework my child does not want to engage” as well as difficulties keeping children’s attention and “too little variety” which were also declared as challenges by parents. These challenges are in keeping with findings by Kohn (2007) that list “children’s frustration and exhaustion, lack of time for other activities, and possible loss of interest in learning” as disadvantages of homework for children (p.35). Homework helps parents to keep in touch with their child’s learning in school and to monitor their child’s progress, noticing any problems that they may be experiencing (NCCA, 2006) this may be seen as correlating with the need for increased communication between home and school as discussed below.

**More input from children**

With a call from parents for a move towards the introduction of oral-based homework, several parents also suggested using this as an opportunity to give the children the chance for some input in their own learning. Again, drawing attention to the value placed upon agency for children by parents. Thus, by giving children this opportunity to become involved in their own learning, we are also giving them power and agency. Parents suggested that it would be
beneficial to “cover some topics through the use of conversations and presentations. “Giving children choice in what they want to learn and letting them decide what inspires them” was also suggested, as a way of supporting children’s learning. One parent suggested homework should be “more projects/ game/activity based so that children can be more creative and have more fun”. Interestingly, no suggestions were made which would involve an increased amount of homework or more written work, with one comment being quite simply “not more homework”. The parents have made it explicitly clear that no one would favour the idea of extra work for their children. It appears that parents would be extremely happy and willing to engage with activities such as games and discussions. However, it must be noted that there were comments which related to reading and writing as a follow up to the oral work, some of these include “reading many books at home and tell each other the books they are reading” or discussing topics orally and then creating quizzes etc around this topics, which may be a suitable compromise. Perhaps a move towards more oral homework or child-led topics within homework would help support the 65% of Irish parents that revealed that they do not feel in a position to fully support their child with their homework (Jackson & Harbison, 2014, p.55) and address the similar percentage of parents that, in the same survey, described homework as a contributor to stress in the household (p.57). It appears that by moving towards oral-based homework, we may be giving parents the opportunity to become partners in their child’s learning which they are clearly yearning for.

**Theme 2: Voice of the Child**

**At home and in school**

In a support document created for parents on the introduction of the PLC the importance given to oral language is highlighted to parents. This document also mentions an increased amount of time it envisages that will be given to talk in class, with opportunities “to give their
opinion and express their thoughts and ideas” (NCCA, 2019). This is concurrent with suggestions made by parents in the data set around schools helping parents to develop their child’s oral language. One parent suggested we “encourage the kids to chat in class around the table” with another suggesting there is a need for “opportunities to converse on topics close to them”, as well the proposal to have open conversations with children “about how they want to learn”. This may lead both schools and parents to cater more for individual children’s needs on their educational journey. It appears that many parents believe that by giving the children this opportunity to express their opinions, thoughts and feelings that we are signalling to them “that they are being heard”, “that their opinions matter” to those around them and that they have potential to make a “significant contribution to the world”. This relates to the principle in the 2009 Aistear framework children as citizens, pointing to the idea that children should be given the opportunity to share their views and opinions about things that matter to them from an early age. We should help them to understand that others may have different views and opinions, and that they respect these from as early a stage as possible, within the home, school and community settings. Another survey response states that through the use of conversations we are allowing children to “understand that all people have opinions” and that this opinion, even if it is different to theirs, is still valid because everyone “has their own way of thinking.” This echoes the idea in the PLC that “as a child’s language develops it enables them to think about their own cultural identity and their personal place in the world” (PLC, 2019, p.7). If we develop oral language skills in children from the earliest stage possible we are creating children that respect the opinions of others and that can “share in the benefits of the society in which they live and to contribute effectively to that society’s sustenance and evolution” (NCCA, 1999, p.6). One response in the survey alluded to children’s opinions being validated through the inclusion of them in conversations thus affording them such an opportunity to contribute to their society also. Kohn (1993) also states
that “the way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions”, thus we must allow children have a voice when it comes to decisions on matters which may affect them.

**Expression of feelings and thoughts.**

Research has clearly presented the links between, and the benefits of, good oral language skills for reading and writing. Research repeatedly suggests that children with good oral language will have better comprehension skills when they are older. However, the benefits of this and necessity for these skills goes far beyond this. We are aware that “language is the principal means of human communication. Through it, ideas and information are expressed and communicated, aspirations, attitudes and emotions are articulated, and imaginative possibilities are predicated” (NCCA, 1999, p.43). It is through language that parents communicate with their children and that thoughts and ideas are shared and discussed. This statement from the NCCA is echoed in the findings of the data, whereby parents place significant value on the relationship between them and their children. It indicates that they feel this can be developed through oral language, and allows children to communicate their feelings as well helping parents “getting to know their personalities”. It appears that parents want to work together with schools to equip children with the required oral language skills which allow them to articulate feelings, thoughts and emotions, as well as developing confidence and open relationships which will allow for this. When given the opportunity to add their own comments one parent responded by saying that we need to “keep talking to our children. Letting the children know we have time to allow them speak to us in relation to anything can only encourage them to talk more”. This comment draws attention to the lack of time some people have, in our increasingly busy daily lives. It also indicates that parents are exhibiting considerable wisdom and knowledge of modern parenting practices. The impact of technology and screen time was commented upon in one of the interviews with the parent
stating that once her children got the I-pads in the evening “that was it” for communication and interaction.

**Theme 3: Communication**

**Between parent and child**

Christian, Morrison and Bryant (1998) suggest that warm, responsive and interesting parent-child interactions can influence a child’s academic development. Therefore, it is no wonder that the importance of communication between a parent and child was mentioned, on several occasions and in several contexts within the data. Parents commented on the importance of building a relationship with their child which allows for open communication and gives the child an opportunity to express themselves in a number of situations. This importance is also highlighted in the Aistear framework, in discussing children as citizens it states that” they have opinions that are worth listening to, and have the right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them” (NCCA,2009,p.8). These decision-making skills and ability to voice their own opinions were mentioned frequently in relation to building children’s language and giving them the relevant opportunities to enable them to express these clearly and confidently. One parent stated in the survey that an informal conversation is how “they learn about things, develop their opinions and feel ok to share it”. It is thought that if the parents begin this from an early age that the children will have the confidence later in life to speak up about issues that affect or them. This is similar to what Cregan (1998) claims that “oral language is the primary mediator of culture, the way in which children locate themselves in the world, and define themselves with it and within it” (p.7), thus by giving children the necessary language skills and opportunities from the earliest age possible we are enabling them to interact with their world and those in it. Findings in the data show that parents believe by developing children’s language skills they are giving them the skills “to
get their point across” and shaping their child’s “understanding of society and of his own emotions”

Whitehurst (1998) suggested that parents can greatly enrich the quality of a young child’s natural language development by providing an environment full of language opportunities. It appears from the data when the child is most relaxed such as at mealtimes and before bed/ in bed in the morning times is when parents get the best results from the informal conversations with their children. These also appear to be the most common times that these casual opportunities for language development occur. This may be as a result of “one to one contact” or “less distractions”. One parent acknowledged that boys were better at opening up when they were “not facing each other e.g. in the car”, which is worth noting. Several parents mention dinner time as a time for communication with one saying “she has learned that it is a time for conversation”. At the time of the interviews for this research study, schools across Ireland were closed and schools were sending work home to be completed in an effort to minimise disruption to the children’s learning. This presented some new opportunities for language learning, with one parent using the example of an increased telephone communication as a result, with family members ringing to speak to the children as opposed to the shorter conversations which don’t always allow for this time to chat in busy family life. This parent also discussed the new opportunities this presented in relation to involving the children in cooking etc which again time constraints often forbids in the hustle and bustle of family life.

**Between parent and school/ teacher**

The importance of and need for good communication between home and school is supported by the PSC which argues that a close co-operation between the home and school is essential “if children are to receive the maximum benefit from the curriculum” (NCCA, 1999, p.21).
This is also echoed within the Aistear framework, with one of its key principles stating “parents and practitioners, need to work together to help me (the child) learn and develop to the best of my ability” (NCCA, 2009, p.9). Therefore, it is no wonder that this arose as an issue on several different questions and in numerous contexts, both in the surveys and interviews. Many parents stated that the only face to face contact they have with their child’s teacher is at the formal parent teacher meeting, which usually occurs in the early stages of the school year. One parent that was interviewed raised the point of not wanting to be “bombarded” with information from the school, but agreed that an increase in communication would allow her more of an overall insight into her child’s learning as her junior infant daughter doesn’t tell her much of what is happening in school on a daily basis. Increased communication would also provide the opportunity for informal use of the language being used in school within the home environment. This relates to Childers & Tomasello (2002) study on exposing children to language numerous times in order for it to become part of their everyday vocabulary. Nutbrown (1999) agrees with this idea maintaining that the more parents know about their children’s learning the better placed they are to understand what their children are doing and how they might further enhance learning opportunities for them at home. This supports parent’s opinions and indicates that schools should be willing to have parents as partners in children’s educational journeys. One way of enabling this may be through increased communication on the school’s part, ensuring that parents are in the best position possible to work alongside teachers and provide further, related learning opportunities. One parent mentioned the inclusion of the weekly Aistear topic on the homework sheet which provides opportunities for discussions on what is happening in school as well as providing opportunities for language development, this coincides with one parent’s suggestion for a “list of topics being explored to develop more at home”. Another suggested that teachers “just keep us up to date and let me know where support is needed and maybe
assisting me on the best way to support my child at home”. The benefit of “solid parent partnerships” is also raised by one respondent stating that without a relationship schools/teacher cannot genuinely support them. This is also touched upon in the Introduction to the PSC, “regular consultation with parents helps teachers to come to a deeper appreciation of children’s needs and so to plan more effective learning experiences” (NCCA, 1999, p.43). However, it is important to note that these relationships must be reciprocal and increased communication between schools and parents will not necessarily lead to improved learning experiences for children. In an Oireachtas discussion on primary education, which examined the benefits of parental involvement in homework, one member claimed that “where parents engage with schools, be it through a parents’ association in whatever format or in some other way, benefits are gained in that the parents will have a greater knowledge of what is happening, the family will benefit and, most importantly, the child will benefit, which is what we are all trying to achieve” (Oireachtas, 2010, p.4). This is alluding to the idea that this increased communication may not necessarily have to be as a result of extra meetings or interactions with the class teacher as it is not the format of the communication that matters, rather more of an overall involvement with school life. This also draws attention to the importance of a give-and-take relationship between teachers and parents in which parents are involved in conversations and decisions made about their child.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented the results obtained from the online survey and telephone interviews and attempted to piece together the data in order to explore the realities of how parents think parents and schools can work together to improve learning outcomes for children in relation to oral language. Analysis and discussion of the main findings in light of the research question were carried out. With these findings in mind, the implications of the study and
conclusions arising from the findings are examined in Chapter five, which will also propose recommendations that may be used as basis for future research.
Chapter 5  Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

The final chapter of this study begins by recalling this research’s area of enquiry followed by an outline of the key findings and the contributions they make to education research in Ireland. It concludes by making some recommendations for the future, as well as discussion of possible implications arising from the study. It is imperative that the limitations of the study set out in chapter three are considered in light of this chapter. This research set out to examine the ways in which parents think that parents and schools can work together in order to effectively develop children’s oral language skills. A qualitative approach was used in this study, with the teacher as researcher.

Summary of Key Findings

The key findings from this study have previously been discussed under three main themes which emerged from the data – Oral language and homework, voice of the child and communication. Each theme presents a number of key findings, in relation to parents working in conjunction with schools in order to develop their child’s oral language skills. A summary of these is now presented, followed by a number of recommendations.

Oral language and homework

The study found that an overwhelming number of parents would be in favour of a move towards oral based homework for their children. They expressed clearly their desire for clarity and communication around homework and did not anticipate that there would be an issue with oral based homework being completed once clear expectations were established. They believed that this is a more flexible approach to homework and that it may alleviate some stress and negativity associated with traditional homework. The desire by parents for meaningful homework was clearly stated. Many parents stated that they would be willing to get involved with activities such as interviews and role plays if those tasks were given as part
of their child’s homework. Parents support the idea of getting the whole family and involved and look favourably upon the idea that it could be completed almost anywhere and wouldn’t require the traditional sitting down at the kitchen table for completion. The long-term benefits such homework could bring, in relation to reading and writing, were acknowledged. Parents are active participants in their child’s learning, they are already engaging in oral language games and activities within home on a daily basis, sometimes without even being aware of it.

**Voice of the child**

The findings of this study have clearly stated that parents are in favour of a more constructivist approach to their children’s education. Within the study a huge amount of emphasis was placed by parents on the necessity to give children a voice and to equip them with the language, confidence and skills to allow them to express their feelings and thoughts on a variety of issues. This applied to allowing them to voice opinions on household issues, giving them choice and input in the classroom and creating children that had the confidence to express these thoughts and feelings in their society, both now and at a later stage in their lives. In working together with parents, schools must acknowledge the thoughts and opinions of children and the importance of the contributions that children can make, to school life, home life and society. They must acknowledge parents’ knowledge of 21st century parenting and their yearning to be involved in the development of their children into agentic and autonomous young adults.

**Communication**

The need for increased communication from schools when supporting parents in developing their children’s oral language was the most noteworthy finding from this study. Therefore, this study is indicating that parents do not believe that the school currently offers sufficient communication. Increasing this communication was the most frequently mentioned
requirement when seeking parents’ ideas on how schools can support them. It is a subject which featured in many different guises, with the most popular being the need for communication between schools and parents in relation to supporting children. Parents have clearly indicated their desire for a reciprocal relationship with schools. Parents want to be given the tools to support children in their learning. It appears from parents’ responses that one meeting with teachers in the early stages of the academic year is not sufficient to put them in the best position to support their child’s literacy development. A variety of communication methods were mentioned throughout, with the Class Dojo proving to be very popular amongst the parent community. The need for effective communication also featured in relation to communication between children and their parents, and the significance of developing open channels of communication in which the child was equipped with the necessary tools to communicate any issues/worries/problems but also to ensure that a positive and open relationship was created to allow for this communication to take place if necessary.

**Possible Implications of this Research**

Research indicates that parental involvement in their children’s learning has a much greater influence on children’s learning than school (Swain, Brooks & Bosley, 2014 as cited in Kiely, 2017). Therefore, it is vital that schools do their best to support parents and encourage their participation in their child’s educational journey in order to ensure the best possible outcomes.

The findings of this small scale study may provide an appetite for future research on a larger scale to investigate if providing oral-based homework for children, and if the use of child-led topics within this would have improved outcomes in the area of oral language development for the younger children in our primary schools. It appears that parents believe it would.
Furthermore, this research might provide a suitable platform for future studies to investigate the potential for schools to create more explanatory documents detailing ways in which parents can help children at home. This issue arose after parents found themselves in a position where they were suddenly delivering the primary school curriculum at home without much prior notice. Such a document was discussed in the interviews and it appears it would be a much-welcomed tool for parents as they aim to develop their children’s literacy skills within the home. It could include websites/ apps/ online programmes.

**Recommendations**

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been made:

1. There needs to be improved clarity in communication with parents. An increased use of messaging apps such as Class Dojo, where parents/teachers can easily be contacted, or through the introduction of a second parent teacher meeting in the academic calendar may prove beneficial in addressing this. The use of apps could aid teachers in sharing of lessons/ learning objectives/ topics being covered in order to allow parents to work on these topics at home. The use of Class Dojo should be extended throughout the whole school and not just be used exclusively at the junior end of the school.

2. There need to be a move from what was referred to as “traditional” homework to homework which has more of a focus on oral language skills in opposition to written work which in some cases may be more time consuming and less flexible in terms of where it can take place.

3. There needs to be an increased amount of meaningful activities such as interviews included as part of children’s homework. These should be activities which provide opportunities for the whole family to engage in.
4. There needs to be increased opportunities for input from the children in relation to topics. The inclusion of more class debates/discussions is also recommended. Parents should be informed of the topics for discussion in order to allow them to develop these at home also.

5. There needs to be more frequent opportunities for parents to come to the school on an informal basis such as grandparent’s day, sports day.

With these recommendations in mind it is hoped that the researcher and her school will be afforded the opportunity to meaningfully embrace parental involvement in their children’s oral language learning as well as developing an increased awareness amongst parents of the importance of developing literacy skills within the home environment. It is intended that the recommendations will be discussed and considered at a staff meeting in the researchers’ school in advance of the new academic year with a view to implementing as many as possible in order to enhance oral language development for children. The recommendations will be achievable in many schools and will support parents and schools in working together to develop children’s oral language skills.
References


SCHOOLS SUPPORTING PARENTS TO ENHANCE ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

PDST. *Guiding Comprehension Teaching for Meaning*. Retrieved from


Rafferty, M. (2014). *A brief review of approaches to oral language development to inform the Area Based Childhood Programme*. Dublin: Centre for Effective Services.


Dear Members of the Board,

I am currently undertaking a Masters in Early Childhood Education, in Marino Institute of Education. As part of my coursework and final year research project, I wish to seek the permission of the Board to carry out some research in this school.

The research project focuses on the importance of oral language and parents’ views on how schools and parents can work together to develop this area of a child’s literacy. The findings of my research will be presented in a thesis. My methodology methods include semi-structured interviews involving parents of 4 children in the current infant classes as well as an anonymous survey which will be emailed to parents from the school email.

Strict confidentiality is central to my research and, in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying details will be revealed in my project. The research will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. The project has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino Ethics in Research Committee and full approval has been granted.

I appreciate that schools are very busy places and I would be deeply grateful if you could find the time to accommodate me in my studies.

Thank you in advance for your support.

Yours sincerely,

Aoife Kitson
Appendix B - Letter to Parents - Survey

Dear Parents/Guardians

As some of you may know I am currently undertaking a Masters in Early Childhood Education in at Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year coursework (thesis), I am conducting a study to investigate parents’ experiences of developing children’s oral language, and how parents and schools can work together to achieve the best outcomes for children.

I am writing to ask you to participate in this research project which would involve you completing an online survey, using Google forms. It should take no longer than ten minutes to complete.

I would be very grateful if you agreed to participate in my research study. I wish to make it clear that you are free to withdraw from the research at any stage, also withdrawing your information up until date of publication. Strict confidentiality is central to my research; it will be conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of Marino Institute of Education. In order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying details of participants will be requested, and all data gathered will be carefully stored on my personal password protected laptop. The data will only be used to write up my research project and will not be disseminated in any way.
The findings of my study will be available on request on its completion. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

To follow the link below to access the survey please click here.

Kindest regards,

Ms. Aoife Kitson
Appendix C - Survey Questions (Taken from Google Forms)

Masters Thesis Questionnaire

Parents Questionnaire.
Please provide an answer for each question. Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study.

I have read the information (email) accompanying this survey.

☐ Yes
☐ No

I consent to the information provided being used in this study.

☐ Yes
☐ No
1. What games/activities, if any, do you engage in that might develop your child’s language skills? Tick as many as appropriate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Column 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading stories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going shopping together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play with construction toys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell jokes/stories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretend play together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compile shopping lists together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play board games/electronic games</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing songs/make music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice religious rituals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. How often do you have an informal conversation with your child? *

- several times a day
- Once a day
- occasionally
- Other...

3. Do you think that there is a time that your child gains the most from these conversations? E.g., when relaxed, when sitting at kitchen table etc. *

Long-answer text

4. Do you think having a conversation is important for your child's development? Why/why not? *

Long-answer text

5. In what way do you think these informal conversations develop your child's: (a) Literacy (reading, writing, oral language) and (b) Overall development (social skills, emotional development) *

Long-answer text

6. How do you think schools can support you to help develop your child's oral language? *

Long-answer text

7. What do you think might be the difference, if any, between an oral language lesson in class and a conversation at home? *

Long-answer text
8. What type of oral homework would you be most likely to engage in? *

- Telling jokes/stories
- Playing language games
- Interviews with friends/family
- Reading stories
- Other...

9. Can you describe any challenges you face in relation to developing your child's literacy (reading, writing, oral language) skills? *

Long-answer text

10. How would you describe your relationship between you and your child's school? *

Long-answer text

11. Do you visit your child's school often? If yes, When? *

Long-answer text
12. How do you think schools can support parents to become more involved in their child’s learning? *

Long-answer text

13. Would you find any of the following helpful for you and your child? Tick all that apply. *

☐ Homework which focuses on oral language

☐ Games sent home to play

☐ Hearing from an oral language expert

☐ Workshops held in school

☐ Tip sheets for parents around developing oral language

14. Any further comments/suggestions on how schools and parents can work together to develop oral language skills for children

Long-answer text
Appendix D- Plain language Statement- Interviews

Plain Language Statement and Informed Consent – Parent/Guardian

Introduction to the research project

As you already know I am currently carrying out research for my final year Master’s thesis in the area of Early Childhood Education in Marino Institute of Education. As part of my studies, I am conducting some interviews to further probe the information already gathered in my online survey. The aim of this research project is to find out, from a parent’s perspective, how schools can support parents in developing their children’s oral language, so as to ensure the best possible outcomes.

What does the study involve?

Parents of children in junior and Senior Infants.

You will be invited to take part in an interview conducted via telephone at a time that is suitable for you. The interview will last no longer than twenty minutes and it will be about your experience of developing your child’s oral language at home. You do not need to do any preparation for the interview. With your permission, I will record the interview because I will need to have a record for the purpose of data analysis. Of course, you have the right to decline my request to record the interview.
Is participation in this interview voluntary? Involvement in this process is completely voluntary. While there are no anticipated risks associated with your participation, you do have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time. You do not have to answer any question you don’t wish to. If there is a particular question that you would rather not answer, you are free not to provide an answer. If you wish to stop your involvement in the interview at any time, you are also free to do so.

What procedures will be used to protect confidentiality?
Every effort will be made to protect participants’ confidentiality. Interviewees will be given a code name. The data collected will be analysed by the researcher (me) alone. Interview notes will be held by me only and stored in a secure location that is password protected. When the evaluation is completed, the data files and transcripts will be permanently deleted. Data collected will be used for this evaluation study only.

How do I find out more about the study?
If you have any questions or wish to research to seek further clarification and information, please contact me via email, or my supervisor Dr Joan Kiely, Marino Institute of Education.

Confirmation of Understanding:

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

Have you read or had read to you the plain language statement? Yes No
Do you understand the information provided? Yes No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study? Yes No
Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes No

Informed consent:
I am aware that if I agree to take part in this study, I can withdraw from participation at any
stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the study have been
completed. I have read and understood all the information in this form. The researcher has
answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I
consent to take part in this research project.

Signed:

Date:
Appendix E- Interview Schedule

Location of interview: Telephone interview
Date:
Interviewer: Aoife Kitson
Notes:

Consent Confirmation:
Remind participants that their participation in this interview is voluntary and that at any stage they may ask to move onto another question, or ask for the recorder to be turned off. On the record, confirm written permission via the Informed Consent Form.

Introduction:
Thank-you for your participation in my project up to this point, through completing the survey on Google Forms a few weeks ago. And also, for agreeing to be involved in this process, especially in these unusual and uncertain times that we find ourselves in. Like I have already explained to you in the email and as you have read on the information sheets, I would like to further investigate some of the findings from my survey.

Q1. One thing that emerged from the surveys was that parents would like increased communication between them and the school, in relation to their child’s learning. How would you feel about this? And in what way do you think the school could provide for this?

Q2. Another topic that came up quite often in the survey was the idea of homework, and the stress/pressure it brings to households, especially when parents are working. Do you think a move towards more oral homework, such as discussions, language games and interview type
homework would be successful? Or other types of homework, such as project-based homework?

Q3. Many parents listed the use of technology/too much screen time as a challenge that they face in developing their child’s oral language. Would you agree with this? Do you think there is a way in which we use could use technology to children’s benefit instead?

Q4. Some parents said that they were happy to leave the teaching up to the teachers. What do you think of the finding that some parents felt they did not have a central role in developing their child's oral language? Is this a job for teachers?

Q5. With the current situation, whereby you are now at home with your child, and possibly even working from home yourself, have you noticed any additional opportunities or challenges around supporting your child's oral language development?

Q6. Any further questions/comments you would like to add.
## Appendix F- List of 59 initial codes from coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial code</th>
<th>Number of times it occurred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing feelings/ ideas</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening skills</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing opinions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing ideas</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nb for learning</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language skills</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing feelings</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing vocabulary</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling/reading-writing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s voice</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection/relationship</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interactions</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral language</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional dev./ confidence</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the world</td>
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</tr>
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<td>News/presentation</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Listening to others</td>
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