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University of Dublin
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An Evaluation of the National Policy of Parental Involvement in their Children's Education and Schools

By

Margaret Josephine Bleach

A dissertation submitted to the School of Education, University of Dublin, Trinity College, Dublin in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Ph.D.

February 2008

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Summary

An Evaluation of the National Policy of Parental Involvement in their Children's Education and Schools

This research evaluates, from the perspectives of parents, how the national policy of parental involvement in their children's education is being implemented in five Catholic primary schools in North Dublin. Two schools have disadvantage status, which entitles them to the services of a Home School Community Liaison teacher. The other two are in a middle class area and are reliant on the good will of the Board of Management, the Principal and the Parents' Association. The fifth school, which my daughters attended, is in a middle class area.

Following a review of the literature on home-school partnership and national policy as outlined in the *Education Act 1998, Education Act 2000, Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999) and *Looking at our School* (DES 2003b), the following four indicators were used to develop the research methodology and explore how the participants were involved in their children's education at home and at school:

- Open, caring, respectful relationships
- Home-school communication
- Parental involvement in the home curriculum
- Parental involvement in the school

Multiple research methods were used to ensure triangulation. Quantitative data, obtained through questionnaires in the four case study schools, was supplemented by qualitative data from participant observation in my daughter's school, interviews and focus groups in the other schools. Some documentary evidence was also used.

Most research participants had a very good relationship with the school. They felt that the teachers listened to them and that they could make a complaint, if necessary. However, some felt very uneasy about raising issues. Most felt that the schools had become more open and approachable over the past decade. Frequent home-school communication and adherence to the values of the school led to better relationships.

Most parents felt that they had enough information about the school. However, much of the communication tended to be one-way and centred on organisational rather than curricular

issues. Parents in the disadvantaged schools and with children in the junior classes were more likely to speak to the teacher, while those in middle class schools and with older children relied on written communication.

Parents, in this research, could be described as 'educators' as they were very active in supporting both their children's learning and the school at home. One-child families were more likely to engage in home educational activities. There was also a difference between middle class and disadvantaged parents. Middle class parent planned their children's educational careers from an early age and were confident that their children would do well in school. While disadvantaged parents had the same hopes for their children, their lack of cultural capital and fears that their children would get in with the 'wrong crowd' meant that they were less confident about their children's futures. Those with lower levels of education were the most 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002).

Parental involvement in their children's schools was limited to the 'set pieces' i.e. attending events and supporting the school's fundraising activities. Only a minority got involved with helping out in the school and/or joining the Parents' Association or the Board of Management. Very few felt that they had a say in school-decision-making and governance. Like most Irish citizens they preferred to rely on individual representation rather than collective action. Disadvantaged parents were more likely to help out in the school and the class room, while middle class parents helped organise school activities. Those who supported the religious and educational values of the school were the most likely to get involved and to feel that they had a say in school policies. One-child families and lone-parents were less likely to volunteer.

Partnership was defined as the relationship between parents, the school, the State and the Catholic Church in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school. While parents were not involved in school planning, the home-school relationship at local level was very supportive. Participants were unaware of the partnership process at national level and felt that parents had virtually no say in national policy. They perceived the State to be solely responsible for the education system and felt that it was not doing enough to support their children's education. While acknowledging the good work of the clergy and religious at local level, they were unsure of what role, if any, the Church should have in school governance.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AGM	Annual General Meeting
B	Boys
BOM	Board of Management
CPSMA	Catholic Primary Schools Managers Association
CSO	Central Statistics Office
D	Disadvantaged
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science (Ireland)
EU	European Union
EWO	Educational Welfare Officer
F	Father
FG	Focus Group
FN	Field Notes
G	Girls
GF	Grandfather
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
I	Interview
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
LAOS	*Looking At Our School- An aid to self-evaluation in primary school*
LS	Local School
M	Middle Class
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCPP	National Centre for Partnership and Performance
NEWB	National Educational Welfare Board
NPCP	National Parents Council Primary
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Q	Questionnaire
RSE	Relationships and Sexuality Education
SAN	School Attendance Notice
SCP	School Completion Programme
SD	School Documentation
SDPS	School Development Planning Service
SI	Senior Infants
SPHE	Social Personal and Health Education
WSE	Whole School Evaluation
YES	Your Education System

Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The last two decades have seen an intense period of discussion and negotiation at national level on the future direction of Irish Education. One of the key aims of this dialogue was to "maximise parent involvement and choice" in their children's education (Ireland 1992 p.27). Not only were parents to be kept informed of their own children's learning, but they were to be involved in decision-making at all levels within the school. This lengthy consultation process culminated in the recent legislation, namely the *Education Act 1998,* and the *Education Welfare Act 2001,* and the *Primary School Curriculum 1999* (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1999a), which outline the national policy of parental involvement.

As a parent of four children, a teacher and a School Development Planning Support (SDPS) facilitator, I had an interest in how the policy was being implemented on the ground. From my observations, there appeared to be a discrepancy between the actual policy of parental involvement at national level and the 'policy-in-use' (Crump 1992 p.419) at local level. Schools, while they depended on the voluntary support of parents, did not have the time or the interest to involve parents. Parents, on the other hand, focused more on the home curriculum and their investment in the human capital of their children (Schultz 1973). While parents were happy to send their children to school and help out if necessary, they showed little enthusiasm for getting involved in their children's schools. This research aims to evaluate the implementation of the national policy of parental involvement in their children's education and schools, using the following questions:

- How are parents involved in their children's education both at home and in school?
- What is their relationship with their children's schools?
- What type of communication system exists between home and school?

The Irish State combines universal benefits with a targeted approach in favour of those most in need (Daly and Yeates 2002 p.88). In general it prefers its citizens to purchase the welfare services they require and contribute either financially and/or by volunteering to the provision of services to those who can not afford to pay privately. In line with this preference, the policy of parental involvement is implemented differently

in schools with disadvantaged status. 'Educational disadvantage' is defined in the *Education Act 1998* as the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools (Ireland 1998). The parents of children attending these schools are more likely to have lower levels of education, be unemployed and live in local authority housing. Under the DEIS action plan (DES 2005d), these schools receive additional resources including a home-school coordinator through the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme. These schools will be referred to throughout the research as disadvantaged schools. Schools, which are not designated as disadvantaged by the DES, will be referred to as middle class schools. The parents in these schools are more likely to have higher levels of education, own their own houses and be in full-time employment. These schools get no additional resources from the DES for home-school liaison. Therefore, this study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- What are the differences between middle class and disadvantaged parents in their involvement in their children's education both at home and at school?
- Are there other variables, such as family status, religion, age, gender, which impact on parental involvement to far greater degree than social class?

Policy implementation involves an extremely complex set of interacting elements over time. Irish society has changed tremendously over the last twenty years since the introduction of the HSCL Scheme in 1990 and the publication of the Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* (Ireland 1992). As partnership is a key element of the educational discourse in Ireland, this research asks:

- How is the national policy of partnership between parents, the school, the State and the Catholic Church in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children at home and at school being implemented?

This chapter explores the background to the policy. Section one examines the parental roles, which influence their involvement in their children's education. In section two, variables, such as gender, citizenship, religion, social class and family forms, are explored. These have an impact on the identities and practices of parents. The changes in society, which have influenced their values and prompted the introduction of the partnership policy paradigm, are also highlighted. Section three examines partnership at national level. The partners include the Catholic Church, the State, teachers and parents. As the dynamics of power infuses all aspects of parental involvement (Reay 1998 p.71), the relationship between these stakeholders is highlighted. In section four, the

implications and challenges of partnership for both parents and schools at local level is outlined. Finally, the term 'partnership' itself is explored.

Family-school relationships are socially-constructed and historically variable (Lareau 1997 p.704). Chapter Two outlines how the national policy of parental involvement was developed. The policy as agreed in the relevant official documents is reviewed. The overall thrust and emphasis of these documents, along with their gaps and inconsistencies, is highlighted. Using the main points in these documents, indicators, which were used to evaluate how the policy was being implemented in the schools in this study, were devised.

The research methodology is outlined in Chapter Three. A case study, involving five Catholic primary schools was used to explore the different ways parents are involved with their children's education and schooling. Three schools are in a middle class area; while the other two have been designated under DEIS as Urban Band 1. This means that they are two of the 150 Irish primary schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage (DES 2005d). Participant observation, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis were the research methods used.

Chapters Four and Five outline the research findings. The home curriculum and the ways parents support the school at home is examined in Chapter Four. These results are discussed in Chapter Six. Chapter Five describes parental involvement in the education system at both national and local level. Participants' perceptions and knowledge of the stakeholders, policy, legislation and curriculum at national level is probed along with their relationship with the school. These findings are explored in Chapter Seven. The final chapter explores the themes from the literature review and evaluates the implementation of the national policy of home-school partnership.

1.2 Parental Involvement in their Children's Education

Parental involvement or investment (Schultz 1973; Bourdieu 1977a p.495) in their children's education begins with the birth of their children and appears to be never ending. Bourdieu (1974; 1977a) suggested that its form will depend on the cultural capital of the family. This consists of parental values and attitudes towards education, the amount of cultural resources such as books, art materials, computers etc. available in the home, along with the educational qualifications obtained by their extended family (Bourdieu 1997 p.47). These will influence both the home curriculum and parental

involvement in their children's school (Burke 1992 p.190). In the literature many labels are used to describe the role parents play in their children's education but for the purposes of this research, they have been summarised under four broad headings: educator, consumer, welfare recipient and supporter. In reality, these roles are intertwined as parents pragmatically adopt the one they perceive as most suited to their children's needs.

The terms 'educator', 'consumer', 'welfare recipient' and 'supporter' were chosen because they appeared to be more relevant to this research than the terms 'involved' and 'uninvolved', which were used by Ryan (1994) and Conaty (2002) to describe parents in the HSCL Scheme. Research suggests that the vast majority of parents are both concerned with and involved in their children's education (Reay 1998 p.64; Furstenberg *et al.* 1999 p.217). However, there can be considerable variations between parents. Whereas some parents, like those in Lopez's (2001 p.14) research, perceive "involvement as primarily attending to the immediate economic/financial needs of their families", others have the social and economic capital to focus on the long-term educational and development needs of their children. This section explores the roles parents can play in their children's education and their influence on home-school relationships.

1.2.1 Educator

Under the Constitution of Ireland (1937), parents are considered to be the primary educators of their children. While traditionally they were only responsible for their children's basic physical needs, parental responsibilities have increased to include nurturing a learning environment, cooperating with and supporting the school and fulfilling their special role in their children's development (Department of Education 1995 p.9; 1996 p.14, Commission on the Family 1998 p.284; Forde Brennan 2003 p.6). In addition, the necessity for advanced educational qualifications in modern societies demands a vast amount of emotional and educational labour from parents and requires them to have a strong orientation towards the future (De Regt and Weenink 2005). In today's society, parents are expected to proactively lead and manage their children's education, both at home and at school, and are considered responsible for all aspects of their children's development.

Due to this social-constructivist theory of learning and developmental psychology, the State and the school have altered their expectations of parents in relation

to their children's education (David 1993 p.160). Out-of-school learning is perceived as providing a fundamental basis for in-school advance (Bourdieu 1974; 1977a; Macbeth and Ravn 1994 p.6). Parents are expected to do a lot of 'educational' work both before and after children come to school (David 1993). This home curriculum consists of the activities and conversations that parents and children engage in from birth onwards. It involves not only the social, cultural and intellectual development of children but the formulation and transmission of values, including their attitudes towards education, learning and career aspirations (Bourdieu 1974 p.34; Heightman 1992 p.21; Commission on the Family 1998 p.547; Fletcher 1999 p. 170; DES 2000a; De Graaf *et al* 2000 p.107). Parents also have to provide their children with what they need in terms of social interaction and/or educational opportunities (Bell and Ribbens 1994 p.243). This involves monitoring their children's development and reinforcing the school curriculum at home (Lareau 1997 p.704).

Most parents, the Commission on the Family (1998 p.85) noted, learn as they go along, influenced by the way they were brought up, by what they have read and their observations of others. Many access expert knowledge through consulting books, magazines and other media (Vincent 1996 p.152; Coleman 1998 p.43; Mc Keown *et al.* 1998 pp.197-8) and networking with other parents (Bell and Ribbens 1994; Epstein and Seyong 1995 pp.119-120). The Internet gives parents access to information from many sources (Levin 2004 p.282). Type 'education + parents' into Google and you get 3,040,000 websites. These sites ranged from information, courses, quizzes, and advice to "activities and resources for parents who want their children to excel in school" (www.eduplace.com/parents/ 2004). As a result of this global traffic in ideas about Western educational thought and egalitarian individualism (Fahey 1998 p.386) more parents are aware of the importance of their role as educators of their children.

Parental involvement in the school is just an extension of this role. They are expected to plan ahead, find the right school, get to know the teachers and the curriculum, join the Parents Association and support their children's learning (Ward 2007). In addition, parents are required to attend school events and activities (DES 2000a) and get involved in the Board of Management (BOM) and policy working groups (SDPS 2004). Familiarity with the schools' routines gives parents information about the workings of the school and provides a useful check on whether their children are moving towards the proper levels of independence and responsibility (Heightman 1992 p.21). It helps them move from a longitudinal, biographical focus to an age graded normative

perspective (Graue et al. 2001 p.478). In addition, it gives parents the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977a) and confidence to act as advocates for their children, when teachers failed to recognise a child's individual needs or even misjudge a child's abilities or intentions (Coleman 1998 p.24; Garanzine 2000 p.245).

Parents in this study who consider that they have a primary responsibility for the education of their children will be considered 'educators'. These parents will be proactive about their role, actively seeking support to enhance their children's educational opportunities and their own skills as parents. Vincent (2001 p.349) described them as 'risk managers'. 'Educators' are not willing to leave education to the school and take very few chances where their children's educational prospects were concerned. They are more likely to initiate contact with the school over achievement, welfare and more systematic issues (Vincent 2001 p.350).

1.2.2 Supporter

The term 'supporter' has been widely used by parents, teachers and the DES to describe the relationship between parents and the school (Department of Education 1995; Hyland 1995; Commission on the Family 1998 p.284). Depending on the parent, this support may be active or silent. Active supporters may be very involved with the school but they do not question or challenge the authority of the school. Silent supporters help their children at home but do not get directly involved with the school. They are, however, quite willing to attend meetings and events when required and contribute financially to their children's education.

This role is based on traditional patriarchal familism (Fahey 1998 p.386). Parents' rights are acknowledged but are perceived to be in harmony with the interests of the school and the teachers (Cullingford 1996a p.2). They are accountable for providing food, clothing and sleep for their child, along with ensuring school attendance and suitable homework conditions (Heightman 1992 p. 21; Macbeth 1994 p.82; National Educational Welfare Board [NEWB] 2004). In addition, parents must demonstrate an interest in and reinforce the child's schoolwork at home and ensure that the child respects and obeys their teachers (Cullingford 1996a pp.11-2; NEWB 2004). Compliance with the school norms of deferential and positive parental involvement is expected (Lareau and McNamara Horvat 1999 p.49). Parents' unpaid labour is thereby used to increase the effectiveness of the education system.

Most parents have no wish to be in control of teachers or the school (Cullingford 1996a p.10; Wyness 1996 p.139; Coleman 1998 p.147). They are conscious of the difficulties teachers face daily. Relying on the expertise and disinterested concern of teachers, the majority of parents respect and support their children's teachers. The formal educational requirements of their children are, in most parents' opinion, best left to the professional expertise of the teachers. Irish parents appear to be similar, preferring to work with teachers rather than against them (Hyland 1995 p.42; DES 2000b).

Parents in this research, who perceive the school and the teacher as having primary responsibility for the education of their children, will be described as 'supporters'. Their role is to support the work of the school and teachers by caring for their children, helping with homework and providing financial and/or other assistance as necessary. 'Supporters' monitor, perhaps question, but do not challenge the teacher in any sustained fashion (Vincent 2001 p.351). This support, which includes not only time and interest but also moral education and actual teaching, should not be defined as passive (Cullingford 1996a p.11). In fact, it can be an extension of parents' role as educators. By gaining the trust of teachers and access to important institutional information, 'supporters' ensure that the school will be answerable to them when problems arise (Cullingford 1996a p.12; Graue *et al.* 2001 p.485).

1.2.3 Consumer

While parents themselves may not favour the term 'consumer' in relation to their children's education (Cullingford 1996b; Gorad 1997), the DES describes them as 'customers' and 'clients' (Department of Education 1996 p.13; DES 1998a p.3). While the Irish government does not encourage market forces in education to the same extent as other Western governments such as Great Britain and the United States, the DES conforms to the market based model of public management (DES 1998b, 2005c). This influences their relationship with schools and parents. Consumerism has also increased in Irish society with individualism and extravagant expenditure on the home and children replacing traditional collective values (Keohane and Kuling 2004 p.158). This market-let approach has been encouraged by the forces of globalisation (Smith 2004 p.514) and will impact on parenting practices and home-school partnership.

Consumerism implies choice of public goods with no necessary involvement in their production or quality (Munn 1998 p.383). A consumer pays another person for the service, has a number of suppliers to choose from, has the legal right to expect a certain

quality of product or service and is normally not obligated to the seller in any way other than paying the amount of money asked for the product or service (Bottery 2005 p.280). It can lead to adversarial, self-interested, fragile relationships with few responsibilities on the part of the consumer. Parents today live in a globalised consumer society. In this fast-paced and impersonal society, they, like most others, want to get on with their business without any unnecessary personal relationships. Many of their parenting tasks are outsourced to others. They purchase the services of day-care, after-school care and recreation centres as well as babysitters and nannies (Dennis 2002 p.112; O'Connor 2003 p.396). To many parents the school may be just another service provider.

Consumers are expected to pay for the services that they receive, with the best services going to the consumer who can pay the most (Bottery 2005 p.284). Some schools receive substantial financial assistance from parents (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 1991 p.45) and the additional costs of education can be a major issue for many families (Commission on the Family 1998 p.286, Society of St Vincent De Paul 2003 p.2). The lengthy lists of school costs includes voluntary contributions, school transport, examination fees, lockers, photocopies, books, uniforms, materials, outings, games and extra-curricular activities. The hidden and often unexpected nature of these costs increases the financial burden on parents.

In addition, consumers can be expected to perform unpaid tasks (Ritzer 2004 p.61) in order to improve organisational efficiency. Similarly, schools ask parents to help with reading, homework and to provide additional resources for their children's education. With parents helping out on school trips, in the classroom, at concerts and sporting events along with painting the school, parental involvement may be a ruse to obtain voluntary labour from parents.

Consumers need skills and knowledge if they are to make informed choices (Schultz 1977 p.317; Levin 2004 p.179). The imbalance of power between vendor and buyer, the lack of alternatives, along with the capacity of individuals to make choices may limit their options (Mintzberg 1996 p.77; Foley 2002 p.103). There is a lack of accurate, profound and clear information about schools (Oplatka 2004 p.153). The information that parents can gather is limited to the visible, image-based organisational structures of the school rather than classroom practices. In Ireland, parents can access the DES's website for a school's Whole School Evaluation (WSE) Report. As it is in its infancy stages, there is not a report available on all schools. Each year, newspapers

publish league tables of second level schools based on the number of students who received places in third level institutions. Getting involved with the school may be the only way parents can access information about schools (Graue *et al.* 2001 pp.481-3; Vincent 2001 p.356) and thus make informed decisions about their children's education.

While in theory, the customer is always right, all organisations, including schools, have ways to control their customers (Blenkin *et al.* 1992 p.52; Foucault 2000 p.18; Ritzer 2004 p.116). They provide cues that indicate to customers what is expected of them as well as a variety of structural constraints that lead their customers to behave in a certain way. Finally, they ensure that customers internalise and follow taken-for-granted norms. Parents are strongly influenced by the collective norms and values of society and the social class to which they belong (Bourdieu 1974 p.33-5; Oplatka 2004 p.157). With the societally-agreed model of a good school so rooted in our society it is unlikely that there will be any strong desire to seek alternative kinds of schools or change the existing structures of schools.

Central to consumerism, according to Gewirtz *et al.* (1995 p.21) is the assumption that parents will invest a great deal of energy in ensuring that they have made the right choice of school for their child. However, economic capital gives a wide choice to some parents, and much less choice or sadly none to others (Cullingford 1996b pp.66-7; Commission on the Family 1998 p.548; Lynch and Lodge 2002 p.183). Cultural capital, which is linked to economic capital (Bourdieu 1997 p.49), is even more crucial in the decoding of schools, the interpretation of information and in the matching of child to school (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995 p.56). While opportunity, nostalgia, tradition and convenience often make school choice a far from rational process, parents may also behave differently depending upon their children's birth order, age or gender (Gorard 1997 p.189). Research using different samples suggested that, in general, the reputation and atmosphere of the school, good discipline and academic results, along with proximity to home and their children's wishes were the influential factors in parental choice of school (Hunter 1991 p.38; West and Varlaam 1991 p.29; Hughes *et al.* 1994 p.204; West *et al.* 1995 p.30; Bosetti 2004 p.398). Many parents preferred schools that appeared to offer similar experiences to their own traditional-style schooling. Most were happy with their children's schools and felt that teachers were doing a good job.

Consumerism emphasises the rights of the individual over the collective responsibilities of all citizens (Hantrais 2004 p.197-8; Bottery 2005 p.278). 'Consumers' focus on the education of their own children rather involvement in their schools. They

actively choose their children's schools and extra-curricular activities and are prepared to supplement the State's provision, whenever necessary. They are aware of the quality and cost of the service provided and will complain if it is not delivered as promised.

1.2.4 Welfare Recipient

Ireland is considered a liberal welfare State. All Irish parents are 'welfare recipients" in that all parents receive a children's allowance, which is a universal monthly non-means tested payment from the State. They are also entitled to avail of the public health, education and other social services. Education, with its emphasis on maintaining social order and developing human capital (Schultz 1977; Lavalette and Cunningham 2001 p.240), is perceived as an integral part of the welfare state. In recent years, the school has become an agent for a variety of groups. These include the NEWB, Special Needs Education Board, National Educational Psychological Service, Health Board and the Gardai. Increasingly it is seen as a focal point for the delivery of a range of health and social services for children and their families (Commission on the Family 1998 p.13; Heeney 2006). These include prevention, screening and treatment services (Gaire and Mahon 2005 p.61), the delivery of parenting support programmes and after-school activities (School Completion Programme [SCP] 2005). This, according to educational experts, yields the double advantage of supporting the intellectual development of all children while alleviating pressure on working mothers (Macbeth 1995 p.52; Commission on the Family 1998 p.48; Esping-Anderson 2002b p.50).

Traditionally, parents were seen as being responsible for the socialisation, moral training and leisure activities of children, while teachers were responsible for their education and academic progress (Wyness 1996 p.55; OECD 1997 p.25). Both were dependent on the other to take their responsibilities seriously and do a good job. As the welfare state has developed, the school's role has expanded. They now provide breakfast clubs, homework clubs and after-school activities. With the introduction of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), teachers have taken on more of the parental role, especially in the moral area (OECD 1997 p.25). Parents increasingly look to the school and experts for support and guidance to help them cope with the modern methods of childrearing (Franklin and Madge 2000 p.43; De Regt and Weenink 2005).

Schools and society can perceive parents, who are different from the norm, as obstacles to their children's learning and educational achievement (Finneran 2000 p.7; Wolfendale 2000 p.9; Zappone 2002 p.50; Cuban 2003 p.42). Consequently, these

parents are singled out for parent education programmes. The HSCL scheme is an initiative which aims to enhance the educational attainment and achievement of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Archer and Shortt 2003 p.43). It promotes home-school cooperation as a means of alleviating the "adverse factors arising from inadequate home support" (Ireland 1992 p.88) in both literacy and numeracy. The HSCL teachers target marginalised families (Conaty 2002). The DEIS Action Plan (DES 2005d), which targets disadvantaged schools, renews the emphasis on the involvement of parents in meeting children's educational needs (Hanafin 2006 p.1).

Two parental traits emerge as crucial for children's success in education. One is the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47; Drudy and Lynch 1993 p.157; OECD 1997 p.22; Giddens 2001 p.296), where parents have the knowledge and economic resources to make the best use of the school system and to compensate for any inadequacies it may have. It enables them to be aware of and take advantage of educational changes and opportunities. The other is having the self-confidence and ability to deal with system (Coleman 1998; Lareau and McNamara Horvat 1999 p.39; Eden 2001 p.98). Being an effective advocate for your children, being able to mediate between the child and school and intervene when appropriate is an essential parenting skill, particularly when 'parental interest' is usually measured by teachers' perceptions of such interest and the number of times parents visit the school rather than the level of interest itself (Drudy and Lynch 1993 pp.154-5).

'Welfare recipients' are those who lack the cultural capital and sense of entitlement (Bourdieu 1997 p.47; Reay 1998 p.70; Vincent 2001 p.360), which allows them to successfully negotiate their children's journey through the education system (Lynch and Lodge 2002 p.183). They are dependent on the professional expertise of teachers and the school.

1.2.5 Summary

The roles parents play in their children's education influence the type of home curriculum they provide and their relationship with their children's school. Using labels described above, this research will explore how parents are involved in their children's education. Are they educators, advocating for and leading their children's learning as they progress through the education system? Do they support the school by helping with homework and supplementing the work of the school with a varied home curriculum and extra-curricular activities? Are they active supporters of the school,

involved in fundraising, school events, classroom and extracurricular activities? Do they operate as consumers – choosing an educational service that will meet the learning needs of their child? Or are they welfare recipients, who are dependent on the school and the State to help them to meet their children's educational and socialisation needs?

1.3 Influence of Parental Identities and Values

Just as parenting practices are influenced by the beliefs and identities of parents, education policies are influenced by the values and norms of the society in which they evolve. In Ireland, the dominant 'status group' (Collins 1977 p.125) is white, Catholic and Irish. This ethnic majority is given a structured superior status within the Constitution (Ireland 1937) and Irish society (Lentin 1999 p.138; Devine *et al.* 2004 p.246). Others like members of other religions, the travelling community, migrant workers and refugees, who do not share the social and cultural values of the nation, are marginalised.

This section highlights the normative practices which underpin Irish society and the education system. These include citizenship, gender, social class, religion and family forms. Their impact on parenting practices and the education system, in particular the policy of parental involvement in their children's education, will be considered. In addition, the links between education and other State policies are explored.

1.3.1 Citizenship

Democracy is a central principle in the Irish Constitution (Ireland 1937). All adult citizens, irrespective of gender and social class, have political rights (O'Halloran 2004 p.20). Politics is organised on the model of a liberal democracy (Peillon 1995 p.365; Daly and Yeates 2003 p.87) with political competition making the parties responsive to the needs and claims of as wide a range of interests as possible. The catch-all nature of the main political parties makes them reluctant to define their ideals and policies. However, the relationship between a general sense of economic well-being and the electoral popularity of the incumbent parties (Mair 1992 p.376; Smith 2004 p.512) ensures that they focus more on economic and social politics than in most other western European party systems. This has resulted in a marked expansion in State intervention (O'Connell and Rottman 1992 p.206), with the electorate being treated like consumers (O'Halloran 2004 p.23), whose vote can be bought by gimmicks and stunts.

'Partnership', which allows organised socio-economic interest groups to be involved in the process of public decision-making, is firmly embedded within the Irish political psyche (Ginsburg 2001; Taylor 2005 p.50). It has formed the cornerstone of government strategy since the beginning of the 1990s and is perceived as having contributed significantly to Ireland's economic regeneration. Cooperative approaches to policy-making and implementation are now considered superior to the traditional systems. As a result, the Irish State uses social partnership to develop policy in all areas, including education. However, this process is not without its problems. The need to achieve a wide consensus often prevents clear policy choices (O'Donnell and Thomas 2002 p.181) and limits decisions to the parameters decided by the interest groups (Compston 2002 p.313). In addition, the government retains ultimate responsibility for decision making (Department of the Taoiseach 2006 p.74) and continues to maintain strategic control along with defining the roles and spheres of influence of the different partners (Green 1997 p.168; Connelly 2007).

The policy processes used by the Irish State are illuminating. The formal process begins with public consultations, which may include public meetings, displays in public buildings and requests for written submissions from the general public through advertisements in the newspapers. Reports are then written and published. Negotiations with related interest groups or social partners take place. Finally, after a highly publicised passage through both houses of the Oireachtas or the local council, the law, plan or regulation is passed. Persistence, one's organisational power base along with an effective use of the media appears to determine the amount of influence one has over these changes.

One of the remarkable features of Irish life is the involvement of people in community groups, resident groups and lobbying campaigns of all kinds (OECD 1997 p.146; Mc Manus 2004 p.80). However, the number of people offering their services as volunteers has dropped (Molloy 2005 p.136). People are too busy, too stressed and too exhausted to find the time. They are also devoting more time to self-advancement and career-based study rather than community involvement (O'Mahony and Prunty 2007 p.9).

The pervasiveness of the clientelistic networks in Irish politics (Mair 1992 p.395; O'Halloran 2004 p.19) reflects the priority that is given to individual interests. The politician's role can be described as both that of a messenger and a legislator (Naughton 2004 p.105; O'Malley 2004). Citizens have easy access to them at both national and

local level through their constituency clinics. At their bequest, politicians raise issues with the appropriate minister or public servant. This system has the advantage of providing a two-way communication between citizens and legislators, where individual grievances are addressed. However, the disadvantage is that politicians can focus entirely on helping individuals to circumvent policies (O'Malley 2004 p.103) instead of collective concerns. By promoting individualism over the common good, it erodes citizenship (O' Sullivan 1992 p.466; O'Halloran 2004 p.22) and limits public debate to immediate concerns rather long-term policy issues (Kelleghan and McGee 2005 p.23).

As *de-facto* citizenship is impossible without social and economic rights, the welfare State was created to provide individuals with the opportunity to be become full and pro-active members of society (Walters 1997 p.222; Bottery 2005 p.268). It has enabled the change from private to public patriarchy (Walby 1994). When necessary, it becomes the 'good parent' (Pinkney 2000 p.116), who supplements or replaces poor and inadequate parents. However, the right of parents as citizens to lead their lives in accordance with their own convictions appears to limit the State's right to intervene in family life (Snik *et al.* 2004 p.182). In addition, the Irish State prefers to sponsor market solutions, encourage private welfare provision as the norm and to limit public responsibilities to acute market failures (Esping-Anderson 2002a p.15; Fine-Davis *et al.* 2004 p.59). The HSCL scheme and DEIS Action Plan (DES 2005d) are part of these preventative measures.

In recent years there has been a major revision of the substance of Irish identity. As represented by the Celtic Tiger, consumerism and economic growth now vie with Catholicism and nationalism as the basis of collective identity (Keohane and Kuhling 2004). There has been a transformation in the status of women, work practices and household forms (Commission on the Family 1998; Esping-Anderson 2002b; Central Statistics Office [CSO] 2007). Increasing prosperity has meant that more citizens than ever before have a stake in the economy through well-paid jobs, their homes and other personal assets (Flannery 2004 p.63). Modern communication systems, such as the Internet and satellite television, allow unprecedented access to the global flow of ideas, information and cultural products (Green 1997 p.162). Membership of the EU (European Union) provides a bench mark against which the competence of the State can be judged. The European 'average' and the OECD league tables enables citizens to see their national policies within a broader context and highlights their government's ability to deliver key services (Leonard 2005 pp.94-5).

1.3.2 Gender

Traditionally gender influenced the role parents played in their children's lives. Mothers were responsible for housework and childcare, while fathers supported the family financially. The Constitution (Ireland 1937) is based on this paradigm of patriarchal familism, or the male breadwinner model (Scannell 1988; Fahey 1998 p.386). It conferred power and status on men in the public spheres of work, politics and religion, confined women to the private sphere of the home and protected marriage as an institution. This resulted in discrimination against both fathers and mothers. Mothers were denied their rights as individual equal citizens, while fathers' rights were dependent on their relationship with the child's mother (Commission on the Family 1998; Mc Keown *et al.* 1998). This model of the mother-child relationship, rather the triangular mother-child-father relationship, is the paradigm that tends to dominate contemporary social science, child psychology and psychoanalysis (Mc Keown *et al.* 1998 p.50). In recent years, there has been a move towards egalitarian individualism, which protects the personal rights of individual citizens (Fahey 1998).

There has also been a move towards the 'adult worker' model in which paid work is a central principle of self-sufficiency and responsibility for both men and women (Williams 2004 p.6). As a result, more mothers are working outside the home. While this may limit their involvement with their children's school (Graue *et al.* 2001 p.487), it does not have to limit their involvement in their children's education. Once mothers have conquered the time and space challenges, they may use home learning, their support network and work place to monitor and support their children's education (Weiss *et al.* 2003). In addition with the increase in their responsibilities, they may perceive paying for private tuition and tutors as far more beneficial to their children's learning than they themselves getting personally involved in providing unpaid labour and fund raising for their children's school.

Keeping fathers stuck in their traditional role, Mc Keown *et al.* (1998 p.208) argued, prevents them from developing to their full potential as fathers. Gender bias in society ignores the domestic and childcare work of fathers and tries to discourage them from getting involved with children at all. At birth the father is treated as the secondary supporting parent. They are expected by their employers to work long hours, which limits their involvement with their children (Williams *et al.* 1998; Van Dreuth *et al.* 1999 p.623; Fine-Davis *et al.* 2004 p.229). In women-centred venues, such as play groups, playgrounds and schools, they feel out of place and uneasy especially when

mothering networks keep a suspicious 'watchful eye' on them (Doucet 2006). In the legal sphere, mothers have more rights and are perceived to control the father-child relationship (Corcoran 2005 p.143). Non-resident fathers are expected to pay maintenance even if their access to the children is restricted (Mc Keown 2001 p.27). State services and supports treat parenting as synonymous with mothering and either ignores fathers or fails to make the necessary contacts with them (Mc Keown 2001; David 2004 p.221).

With more mothers working outside the home, there is evidence that fathers are taking more responsibility for childcare (Williams *et al.* 1998 p.494). Both Andrews (2005 p.64) and Osnowitz (2005) found that fathers were as emotionally responsive and nurturing of children as mothers and had no problems undertaking the visible responsibilities typically associated with motherhood, such as school related activities and medical appointments. Recent research has highlighted the positive impact of father involvement on educational attainment (Flouri and Buchanan 2004 pp.149-150) and decision making (Brooks 2004).

Despite the trend towards egalitarian individualism, parental involvement in schools tends to be a gendered activity (Abrahamson *et al.* 2005 p.47). While the mothers' role has been extended to include both traditional male and female responsibilities (David 2004), fathers continue to be absent or shadowy figures in their children's education. Despite asking for both parents' participation, it was mainly mothers who agreed to be interviewed in Graue *et al.*'s (2001 pp.475-6) study. They observed that while fathers attended official school functions, mothers predominated in the face-to-face interactions at the school. In Lareau's (1997 p.711) study, only a few fathers had very specific information about the school. Most depended on their wives to collect and store this information. However, Brooks (2004 p.501) argued that it would be wrong to assume that there was a correlation between the level of involvement and the level of influence on educational decision making. Fathers played an important role in their children's higher education choices as a result of their access to particular forms of social capital (Amato 1998 p.268; Brooks 2004 p.505). While mothers may have access to better information about the schools, fathers may have more information about the qualifications and skills necessary to succeed in the workplace.

At its core, being a parent involves taking responsibility for one's children. Behaviours by fathers, which impact on children, are no different to those of mothers (Mc Keown *et al.* 1998). While childcare remains primarily a women's responsibility,

with the majority of 'educational work' being carried out by mothers, fathers are both able and willing, if required, to assume the role of 'labourer of educational choice' (Brooks 2004 p.512). Geist (2005 p.30) found that the domestic division of labour depended on the gender ideology of men and women, the number of hours they worked and their relative financial resources.

1.3.3 Social Class

While social class influences the identity of parents, there is disagreement about its influence on their involvement in their children's education. Some would suggest that it is the parents' commitment to (Coleman 1998 p.10) and interest in (Drudy and Lynch 1993 p.154-7; Clancy 1995 p.488) education rather than their social class (Dustmann 2004), which makes the difference. The social capital (Putnam 2000 p.296) of the parents, along with their sense of 'entitlement' (Vincent 2001 p. 348) as regards their children's education, is also influential. However, Bourdieu (1977a p.497) found that 'a very pronounced correlation may be observed between academic success and the family's cultural capital measured by the academic level of the forbears over two generations on both sides of the family'. He (Bourdieu 1997 p.48) suggested that the domestic transmission of cultural capital, which is inextricably linked to social class and economic capital, is 'the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment'. Other studies have also shown that education is a proxy for privilege or middle class values (Putnam 2000 p.95) and it is educated parents who are normally most active in fostering the human capital development of their children (De Graaf *et al* 2000 p.105; Craig 2006 p.563).

Lynch and Lodge (2002 p.63) suggest that social class is a silent subject where euphemistic language, such as good, bad, disadvantaged, marginalised, is used to describe the problem. They (Lynch and Lodge 2002 p.183) suggested that inequality works at two levels. Firstly, national policies create serious economic inequalities between classes. As a result, low income working class households are seriously disadvantaged as they lack the money, transport, time and sometimes even the knowledge to discriminate between schools. Middle class families, because of their social, cultural and economic capital, are able to take full advantage of the system and make the freest choices (Schultz p.S3; Bourdieu 1974). The State needs to recognise how much parental success is interwoven in to a system of opportunity and equality of

life chances that are set by economic and political priorities (Furstenberg *et al.* 1999 p.226; Zappone 2002 p.41).

Being an advocate for your child at school is one of the most important roles a parent plays in the education system. The sense of 'entitlement' (Vincent 2001 p.348) of disadvantaged parents was such that they assumed that they had neither the capacity nor the right to intervene in school matters and reacted with either anger or resigned acceptance (McNamara Horvat *et al.* 2003 p.14). They felt constantly under pressure to demonstrate that they were 'good' parents by caring for their children, valuing education and turning their children out clean and tidy (Carlen *et al.* 1992 pp.165-6). Due to their own low levels of educational attainment, some disadvantaged parents lacked confidence in their ability to help their children (Lareau 1997 p.710). Middle class parents, on the other hand, believed that they possess similar or superior educational skills and prestige to the teachers (Lareau 1997 p.708). They use their cultural capital and social networks to contest the school's official view of their child's abilities, influence the behaviour and selection of teachers, strategically customise their child's school career and locate professional advice and expertise (McNamara Horvat *et al.* 2003 p.14). Depending on the circumstances, middle class parents react either collectively or as individuals and will use their networks to link with others who have the necessary information, expertise or authority to compel the school to follow a preferred course of action.

Cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997) is an important asset to parents. The middle class mothers in Reay's (1998 p.70) study were engaged in an extensive systematic programme of generating cultural capital for their children. The upper middle class respondents in De Regt and Weenink's (2005 p.71) research, who felt unable to force their lazy, unwilling or unruly child to attend school and complete homework, used their economic and cultural capital to procure an alternative route in the educational process for their children. Many disadvantaged parents, Furstenberg *et al.* (1999 p.226) found, did not have adequate knowledge of what it takes to achieve in the middle class world. Not having the cultural and economic resources (Bourdieu 1974; Schultz 1973; 1977) to subcontract to those who did, these disadvantaged parents tended to focus on the here and now, believing that the future would take care of itself if they managed to keep their children in school and out of trouble (Furstenberg *et al.* 1999 pp.225-6). While agreeing with the need for education, they found it difficult to prevent their children dropping out of school (Carlen *et al.* 1992 pp.148-9). While both sets of parents were similar in their

feelings of powerlessness around the behaviour of their children, the disadvantaged parents felt powerless in their relationship with the school and welfare authorities. As a result, they tended to adopt a resigned fatalism about the outcomes of their children's education (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995 p.44).

According to standard measures, the ill health, emotional and behavioural problems of children of parents in poor environments/poverty were not much higher than the population as a whole, which suggests that these parents were managing to care for their children well (Furstenberg *et al.* 1999 p.217; Quinton 2004 p.59). In the second of the two Annual Parent Surveys for an Early Intervention Strategy Project in eleven Scottish urban authorities, characterised by extensive social disadvantage and educational underachievement, the picture of the educational life in these, often hard pressed, families was encouragingly upbeat and positive (Bastiani 2000 p.20). A majority provided regular encouragement and practical support for their children's school learning and were actively engaged as a family in a wide range of educational activities, both in the home and throughout the wider community. In its review of the implementation of the revised curriculum, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2005b pp.207-8) found that the parents in disadvantaged schools were much more involved in their children's learning at school than those in middle class schools. Similarly, the working class parents in Reay's (1998 p.62) study talked in terms of regular involvement spanning curricular as well as social issues. However, absenteeism is higher in the most disadvantaged urban schools with almost a quarter missing twenty days or more in the school year 2004-05 (NEWB 2005 p.27). In comparison only 7% of students in the least urban disadvantaged schools missed twenty days or more.

The policy of parental involvement is implemented differently in middle class and disadvantaged schools. In disadvantaged areas, schools have the benefit of the HSCL programme, which is a specific intervention to help the disadvantaged access the educational and cultural advantages of the middle classes. This is further discussed in Chapter Two. Parental involvement in middle class schools is entirely dependent on the awareness of the BOM of its responsibilities towards parents, the goodwill of the principal and the voluntary activities of the Parents Association and individual parents. While parental involvement in their children's education in middle class and disadvantaged schools will be compared in this research, Furstenberg *et al.* (1999 p.224)

found that resourceful parents, who have at their command an array of family management practices, are more likely to succeed regardless of where they live.

1.3.4 Religious Values

For many parents, religion is a key influence on their identity and values (Herbert 2003 p.3). Not only does their religion support their spiritual beliefs, but it encourages the development of their social capital. Putnam (2000 p.66) found that faith communities, in which people worshipped together, provided an important incubator for civic skills and norms. In Ireland, it appears to be similar with Church-goers more likely to volunteer (Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007b p.14; CSO 2007b p.29).

For historical reasons, there has been a close identification between Irish citizenship and Catholicism (Herbert 2003 p.11; Williams 2005 p.34). The Catholic Church was the dominant interest group in the State up to the late 1950s. By providing legitimacy, external recognition and stability to the newly established republic (Hornsby-Smith 1992 p.275; NicGhiolla Phádraig 1995 pp.599-609), it played an important role in the formation and development of the State. Through its monopoly over morality and the acceptable standards of behaviour, the Catholic Church formed a collective orthodoxy, which permeated the Constitution (Ireland 1937) along with civil society and the interest groups within it (Keogh 1988; Inglis 2000 p.50; Lodge 2004 p.21). Together with the State, it controlled and dominated most aspects of people's lives (Hilliard 2003). While the majority passively accepted the situation, others adopted a strategy of deliberate distancing.

In recent years, there has been a major change in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Irish people. Membership of the EU, the expansion of the welfare state and an increasingly multi-cultural society has altered the status of the Church (NicGhiolla Phádraig 1995 p.612; Fuller 2002). It has been forced to move from a situation of total control and domination to one where it is unsure of its role in a "status-conventional society" (Waters 2000 p.54). The bishops are no longer paternalistic authority figures, who can issue diktats, which will be obeyed. Politicians are influenced far more by EU policy agendas, social partnership agreements and the demands of the electorate than by the advice or warnings of the bishops. A clear distinction has been drawn between the Church's teaching on morality and State law (Fuller 2002 p.247) with both the legislators and the electorate expected to act according to their consciences.

In the past, women played a crucial role in passing on the faith to their children and creating vocations. Both Inglis (1998 p.24) and Fuller (2002) agreed that the rigorous moral discipline imposed by the Catholic Church on the State could not have been attained without the "Irish Mother". She was the Church's representative in the home, supervising the moral conduct of her husband and children. As was seen earlier, the move from patriarchal familism to egalitarian individualism means that parenting is increasingly perceived as joint responsibility. European gender equality legislation, along with the development of feminism and the women's movement, has given women economic and political power. They are no longer dependent on the moral power of the Church (Inglis 1998; Fuller 2002 p.239). Today, the global media, with their educational and psychological experts, appear to influence mothers and their parenting practices more than the Church and the 'Irish Mother' can no longer be relied on to inculcate religious values in her children.

According to Lynch and Lodge (2002 p.142), religion was of little relevance to the young people in their study. Fulton (2000b p.161) described the young Catholics in his study as consumers at the supermarket of post-material and spiritual goods. This has been described as "*à la carte* Catholicism" (Pollard 2001 p.86), with the Catholic faith being seen as just one possibility in a range of religious options. With individual conscience displacing external authority, the gap between the institutional Church's position on personal morality and the views and practices of most young believers has widened (Fulton 2000b p.169). In addition, the prestige and credibility of the Church has been undermined by a series of scandals, which have compromised the role of the bishops as moral guides and the Church's ability to proclaim the gospel (Fuller 2002 p.252). It appears that like in America the decline in religious participation can be attributed mainly to generational differences (Putnam 2000 p.72).

While there may be a consistent decline in the number of Catholics, it important to acknowledge that 86.8% of the population described themselves as Roman Catholics in the 2006 Census (CSO 2007a p.31). Catholicism continues to remain part of the Irish identity and a significant source of social interaction (Dowling 2000 p.68; Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007b p.13). Fahey (1992a pp.257-9) suggested that convention, social conformity and a stubborn allegiance to the Church, rather than strong personal conviction, underlies some of the devotionalism of Irish Catholics. Due to pressure from extended family and neighbours, parents may find it difficult to break their links with the Church (Fulton 2000b p.164). Religious rituals, which incorporate members in to a

group (McGuire 2002 p.235), remain important secular family and community celebrations (Lodge 1999 p.213). Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation continue to be significant sacramental occasions in the life of a child and his or her parents.

Social stability, according to Hunt (2002 p.61) rests on a shared morality. Religion has an important function in enforcing a value consensus and the symbolic 'worshiping' of society. The new 'civil religion' (Hunt 2002 p.61) in Ireland, which is perhaps best represented by the celebration of St Patrick's Day, retains many of the symbols and characteristics of Catholicism. While differences in beliefs are acknowledged, they tend to be incorporated into the views of the majority. 'Newcomer' and other minority groups are expected to live by the norms of Irish society (Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007c p.22)

1.3.5 Family or Lifestyle Factors

Epstein and Seyong (1995 p.122) argued that time was an important element in the nature and extent of home-school partnership. The age of both parents and children along with family size and form influence parenting practices.

The age of both the parent and their children may impact on parental involvement in their children's education. Volunteering and community involvement is higher among older people (CSO 2007b p.29; Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007b p.3) with young people the least likely to get involved. They prefer to prioritise the personal and private over the public and collective (Putnam 2000 p.259). However, Murphy (2002 p.90) found that the age of the parent was irrelevant. First time parents were more likely to get involved with those with older children feeling that they had done their share. Other studies were similar. They found that involvement tended to decrease from junior to senior class (Ryan 1994 p.26; DES 2005a p.63; NCCA 2005 p.208).

The gender of the child also influences the parent-child relationship. Girls were more likely to involve their parents in their education both at home and at school (Edwards and Alldred 2000 p.448). They were also more likely to do more family and self care than boys (Evertsson 2006).

Family size has decreased in Ireland from over four children in the 1960s to less than two in 2006 (CSO 2007a p.20). This will influence parenting practices as fewer children means that parents have more resources to invest in quality per child (Schultz 1973 p.S8). Large families create a very high demand for unpaid labour in the home

while the costs of childcare are similarly multiplied (Fahey and Russell 2001 p.57). They are also more likely to live in social housing than other families with children (Fahey and Russell 2001 pp.61-2). Mothers of large families are more likely to be older and have lower education qualifications. While family size may not influence the love and care parents have for their children, it is more difficult to give children individual attention in large families. Children in large families have to learn to share their time, belongings and space with others. In contrast, only children are more likely to have the complete attention of their parents. They tend to be over-indulged, over-praised and mollycoddled (McWilliams 2006 p.47).

One of the more recent changes in Irish society has been the growth in lone parent families, headed by women, as a result of marital breakdown and unmarried mothers (Commission on the Family 1998 pp.97-8; CSO 2007a). These families may find it more difficult to rear their children, while also securing family income (Fanning 2003 p.14; Hantrais 2004 p.93). Fifty percent of the non-attendance cases, in a survey done in Dublin in November 1992, were from one-parent families (Department of Education 1994 p.7). The group of parents, Ryan (1994 p.191), in her report on parental involvement in the HSCL Scheme, described as 'uninvolved – needs helps' were more likely to be in one-parent families. However, Richardson (2004 pp.244-8) found that the teenage mothers in her study were concerned and caring about their children and were generally coping well despite the range of difficulties they faced. Most regretted leaving school without qualifications and hoped that their children would remain in education and gain good employment (Richardson 2004 pp.249). While studies have found that children in lone-parent families have a lower level of educational attainment compared with children in two-parent families, the education levels of the parents appear to have a far greater impact (Dronkers 1994 p.186; Crozier and Davies 2006 p.681). Lone parenting is not solely class-related (Nolan and Whelan 1999 p.112)

1.3.6 Summary

As parental identities and values have such an influence on their parenting practices, this research will examine their impact on home-school partnership. How will participants' perceptions of themselves as citizens influence their relationship with the school? Will there be a difference between how mothers and fathers lead and manage their children's education? Are middle class and disadvantaged parents similar in their attitudes towards child rearing and schooling? How does economic and cultural capital

influence parenting practices? What difference will the HSCL scheme make to the involvement of parents in disadvantaged schools? Finally, how will the religious beliefs and life stages of the respondents influence their involvement in their children's education? What impact has the forces of Church paternalism, political clientelism (O'Sullivan 1992 p.464) and egalitarian individualism (Fahey 1998) on parental involvement in their children's schools?

1.4 Partnership at National Level

Culturally prescribed concepts like partnership are invested with considerable power (O' Sullivan 1989 p.221). They define the boundaries of normality and demand allegiance for the purpose of meaningful human contact. It is therefore important to analyse not only why and how a concept like partnership is used but whose interests it serves. The development of the national policy of partnership in education is described in further detail in Chapter Two.

The terms 'partners' and 'partnership' in education, according to Sugrue (2004 p.192) were not widely used before the National Education Convention Report (Coolahan 1994) and only achieved policy orthodoxy in the White Paper (Department of Education 1995 p.9). While these days 'partnership' is firmly rooted in the educational landscape, the views of the partners at national level are illuminating. This section examines those views.

1.4.1 Department of Education and Science (DES)

The Irish education system is highly centralised with curriculum, evaluation and funding all centrally controlled by the DES. This is perceived as vital to the State achieving its goals of economic prosperity, social well-being and a good quality of life for all within a democratically structured society (Department of Education 1995 p.4). The capacity to supply a highly skilled and qualified workforce is critical to enhancing the competitiveness of the Irish economy and attracting inward investment (Clancy 1995 p.479; DES 1998b p.6; Murphy 2003). The DES's mission statement reflects these priorities:

> The mission of the Department of Education is to ensure the provision of a comprehensive, cost-effective and accessible education system of the highest quality, as measured by international standards, which will:
> - enable individuals to develop to their full potential as persons and to participate fully as citizens in society and
> - contribute to social and economic development

(Department of Education 1995 p.193)

To achieve these goals, the State feels that it must be able to decide on

> the period during which a child must attend school, the length of the school day, the subject matter to be taught and the manner of teaching. Children and parents must abide by the school's regime, subject only to the parents' rights to withdraw their children from religious instruction. The minimum standard of education should be based on expert advice and opinion, best practice in countries with whom Ireland shares similar economic and social conditions and the actual circumstance which prevail in society
>
> (Department of Education 1994 p.5)

It appears that parents' role as the primary educators of their children is limited by the norms of the DES and its educational experts. This is in keeping with the government's retention of the ultimate responsibility for policy decision-making (Department of the Taoiseach 2006 p.74). Partnership is defined as consulting the social partners on policy proposals and the design of implementation arrangements.

The DES considers 'raising awareness of the importance of families and communities in providing encouragement and the right setting for effective learning' as one of the challenges facing the education system (DES 2005e p.13). To this end and as part of its responsibility to provide for those children whose parents have neglected their duty (Ireland 1937), the DES, in conjunction with various voluntary and statutory agencies, provides a range of preventative initiatives, which target disaffected and marginalised pupils and their families (Commission on the Family 1998; Murphy 2000). Schools with disadvantaged status have DES funded programmes such as the Early Start Pre-School Intervention Programme, the HSCL and the SCP. These have been integrated under DEIS, the DES's action plan for social inclusion (DES 2005d), which aims to enhance the educational achievement of pupils and to promote their retention in the education system.

By providing children with pre-school and after-school meals, homework support, along with extra-curricular sporting and cultural activities, these schools are becoming an extension of the home (Heeney 2006 p.148). While home-school partnership is a theme running though the documentation, these programmes are often devised without dialogue or consultation with the parents who will be most affected by them (Hanafin and Lynch 2002 p.37). As their emphasis is on increasing children's chances of educational success along with the capabilities and skills of their parents

(DES 2005d p.40; Hanafin 2006 p.1), they tend to concentrate on parent information and education programmes (Commission on the Family 1998; Murphy 2000; Conaty 2002) rather than parental involvement in decision-making and governance (DES 2006b).

Middle class parents, on the other hand, are an important lobby and are perceived by the government as a key sounding board for educational policy (Biastiani 1989 p.5, Kilfeather 2003 p.243) and a source of electoral support. Media recommendations (Reid 2004 p.3) to a newly appointed Minister for Education included the advice that policies, which upset parents, especially middle class voting ones, are best avoided. However, despite parent bodies insisting on equal representation with other educational partners, their role remains both ambiguous and heavily circumscribed. Power remains in the hands of a heavily centralised government department, the patron of the schools and the industrial agreements between the teachers' unions and the State (Tovey and Share 2003 p.194).

1.4.2 Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)

The INTO, which represents Primary School teachers, is among the most powerful white-collar unions in the country. It enjoys direct negotiating rights with the government along with representation on statutory and investigative bodies on various aspects of education (Clancy 1999 p.84). With a growing influence within the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in helping to set the agendas of the various national understandings negotiated since the late 1980s, the INTO may prevent certain issues getting on the policy agenda and circumscribe the range of solutions that are considered. It fears that DES's promotion of partnership with parents is an attempt to curtail its power (Walshe 1999 p.115) and restrict its professionalism.

The INTO believes that increased parental involvement has the potential to transform schools into organisations where the work of both teachers and parents is recognised, valued and appreciated (INTO 1997). However, its members are concerned that the increasing parental involvement in schools, particularly to the point of partnership, could be a threat to their professional status and competence (INTO 1997 p.17). Not only do teachers feel, as professionals, that they should be guiding the agenda but they also want to remain the final arbiters of professional matters in schools (INTO 1997 p.9; De Paor 2003 p.167) with parental involvement in the classroom at the discretion of the principal and the individual class teacher (INTO 1997 p.118). It appears that the INTO wishes to limit the parents' position to the traditional role of 'supporter'.

1.4.3 The Catholic Church

The majority of schools (3,104/3,386, 2005 figures) in Ireland are still under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Gaire and Mahon 2005 p.15). Traditionally, education was perceived as a means of religious socialisation, which would ensure that the Church maintained its influence and moral control over Irish citizens (Hornsby-Smith 1992 p.275; Tovey and Share 2003 pp.391-402). The rights of parents and the Church were considered to be complementary (O' Sullivan 1992 p.465). It was implicitly understood that the patron or trustee acted on behalf of parents who wished their children to be educated in the Catholic tradition (Coolahan 1994 p.24; Clancy 1999 p.86). In reality, the lack of a genuine alternative combined with the social and religious consequences meant that parents had no choice but to send their children to Catholic schools (Inglis 1998 pp.57-8; Tuohy 2005 p.120). This allowed the Church to monitor parents and ensure that children were instructed in to and imbued with the Church's teaching (Inglis 1998 p.57). In turn, children reintroduced institutional adherence among parents who may not wish to contradict what was taught in school.

While acknowledging that much of the protection for Catholic schools derives from the rights of parents as the primary educators of their children and that schools should be open, welcoming and inclusive places for parents, the Catholic Primary School Managers' Association (CPSMA 2004 p.17) hold similar views to the INTO. They assert that

> In a spirit of collaboration and trust, the Constitution of the Parents Association will recognise that there are areas of school activity which belong to the professional work of the teachers. There will also be a recognition that certain areas of responsibility (e.g. finance) belong to the Board of Management.
> (CPSMA 2004 p.17)

The CPSMA appears to want parents to remain in their traditional role as 'silent partners' (O' Sullivan 1992 p.465) or 'supporters'.

1.4.4 National Parents Council Primary (NPCP)

Traditionally, parents were not included in the decision-making processes at either national or local level. During the 1970s a number of parent associations and at least two national associations were established. In 1985 the NPCP was established by the Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey, and the inspectorate as part of the Government Programme for Action in Education (OECD 1997 p.146; NPCP 2006 p.22). With its aim to improve the education of children and to support the involvement of

parents in their children's education (NPCP 2007b), the NPCP emphasises partnership and respect for the other parties in education rather than control (Hyland 1995, Colgan 2003). Insisting that the principles enshrined in Article 42 of the Constitution must permeate all educational change, they have been fully involved in the development of recent educational policy and have representatives on the primary education committees set up by the DES (Kilfeather 2003 p.243). However, its parent body appear to focus more on local issues with the most frequent calls to its helpline being about bullying behaviour in schools (NPCP 2006 p.4)

The heterogeneous nature of the parent body (OECD 1997 p.16) and ensuring that spokespersons are truly representative poses difficulties for the NPCP (Clancy 1999 p.86). Casual observation, according to Drudy and Lynch (1993 p.126), would suggest that Parents Associations are female dominated and predominately middle class. Their present structures limit the representation and participation of parents nationally. A school needs to have a Parents Association affiliated to the NPCP before its parents can access the NPCP (Colgan 2003; Kilfeather 2005 p.194). It is also dependent on school principals and BOMs to give information to parents. At present, the NPCP are in the process of modernising to meet the identified needs of parents and to make the organisation more flexible, responsive and inclusive (Kilfeather 2005 p.194; NPCP 2007a).

In addition to the NPCP, parents, supported by Article 42 and various Catholic fundamentalist groups, have questioned the direction of religious, moral and social education. They have been quite influential in preventing the full implementation of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme and have ensured that SPHE is the only curriculum subject where it is recommended that parents are involved in the development and implementation of the whole school policy (DES 2003b) and need to be fully informed of the content and teaching approaches (DES 2000a p.38).

1.4.5 Summary

In other words, to paraphrase Chomsky (1987 p.127), partnership is encouraged but within certain parameters defined by the existing power blocks (Blenkin *et al.* 1992 p.54; Macbeth and Ravn 1994 p.10; Fletcher 1999 p.171). This means that home-school partnership is perceived solely in terms of the willingness and capacity of parents to support the school and other educational partners (Department of Education 1995; Commission on the Family 1998 p.284; Bastiani 2000 p.21; Lopez 2001 p.4). These

attitudes appear to limit the constitutional rights of parents as the primary and natural educators of their children (Ireland 1937) and deny them a genuine role in the process of shaping wider educational purposes.

1.5 Partnership at Local Level

A notable feature of school administration in the past was the distancing of parental involvement (Coolahan 1989 p.55). The preferred relationship was one of silent partnership, with parents pushing the child to do well at home while maintaining a respectful distance from the teachers (Lareau 1997 p.706; Hargreaves 2000 p.220). The principal and teachers were responsible for the organisation of school life and the implementation of the curriculum. Parents were responsible for their children outside school hours and for supplementing State aid to schools through voluntary contributions, unpaid labour and other forms of parental involvement (O'Connell and Rottman 1992 pp.218-9; Hill 1996 p.203; Commission on the Family 1998 p.286; Bloch *et al.* 2003 p.12). The relatively recent national policy of home-school partnership challenges these largely taken-for-granted professional and organisational structures.

Many schools treat parents as if they were the estranged partner. They either consider parents a pain because of their interference or a problem because of their indifference (Hughes *et al.* 1994 p.2, Wyness 1996; Fletcher 1999 p.166). Consequently, parents are dismissed, either explicitly and/or implicitly, from the process of educating their child (Coleman 1998 p.13). There can be substantial resistance from teachers to the idea that parents should be kept informed of their children's progress and/or allowed make crucial decisions about their children's education. This is particularly obvious in the case of parents who appear to hold values which are antithetical to those of the school (Hughes *et al.* 1994 p.164).

While appearing to implement the national policy of parental involvement, schools can convert it into an institutionally non-threatening form, which serves to reinforce existing power structures (Drudy and Lynch 1993 p.112; Simpson and Cieslik 2002 pp.119-28; Dickson *et al.* 2004 p.120). Teachers, especially those concerned about the parents' power to question their authority and professional competence, may limit their contact with parents (Burke 1992 pp.189-90; Stoll and Fink 1996 p.133; INTO 1997 p.17; Scanlon-Feeley 2004 p.103) and use their professional knowledge and language to keep parents at a distance (Coleman 1998 p.145; Hargreaves 2000 p.220).

Requests for help can be laden with the social and cultural experiences of the intellectual and economic elites (Lareau 1997 p.704).

In the so-called partnership between home and school, the home can be treated as the junior partner, with parents feeling that they are in a no-win situation with the school (Carlen *et al.* 1992 p.138; Hughes 1994 p.195). Despite the presence of Parents Associations and parent representatives on the BOM, many parents feel that there are few opportunities for them to voice their views on issues which are directly affecting their children's lives (Hughes 1994 p.196; Hanafin and Lynch 2002 p.40). The parents in Hanafin and Lynch's (2002 p.45) study were particularly resentful of decisions taken at school level over which they had no control but which cost them money. When they questioned these or other matters they were made to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome.

There are also question marks over the scope for lay and professional people to engage in dialogue (Vincent 2001 p.347). The current education system is not designed for partnership between parents and teachers. It can be difficult to find ways to harness home-learning without disrupting the established system or putting undue pressure on teachers and parents (Macbeth 1994 p.79). In addition, providing opportunities for a more participative role for parents at school level is no guarantee that they will be taken up or used (Munn 1998 p.392). Parents may have similar attitudes to many citizens who, as Irvin and Stansbury (2004 pp.58-9) found, prefer to pay people to do the decision making and the work rather than get personally involved. This may be because they are preoccupied with their personal lives, uninformed and/or apathetic or they prefer to control behaviour by participating in a non-decision making process (Held 1989 p.62). The partnership process may be perceived by parents as a system of elite decision making and public ratification with the political processes providing an appearance of democratic control that masks where the real power lies (Chomsky 1987 p.6; Held 1989 p.61; Riordan 2003; pp.60-1).

Educational goals are rarely disputed in Ireland (Tuohy 2005 p.118). The key issue is how schools will implement them. Schools must balance the demands from the state, society and parents with their long-term institutional requirements and the needs of their pupils. While schools are free to prioritise using the school development planning process, they must work within the policy framework provided by the State. Circulars from the DES and the patron of the school keep them informed of their duties, with regular inspections ensuring accountability. Schools, through their interactions with parents, will determine the extent to which this national policy of parental involvement

will be effective (Fitz 1994 p.55). They will determine whether parents have a voice, get a hearing or are just ignored (Fine 1997 p.467). The degree to which the policy differs from the existing *status quo* in the school the more difficult it will be to implement.

1.6 Definition of Partnership

As Chapter Two will outline, the term 'partnership' was an element in both the discourse and documentation on Irish educational legislative and curriculum changes. A 'partnership' is generally viewed as a formal agreement between two or more parties that will provide them with mutual benefits (Levin 2004 p.171). However, the term, being part of the symbolic political and social language, embraces a wide range of concepts. Burgos (2004) describes it as a 'floating and empty signifier', a universal value, which means a lot of different things to different people.

Some view partnership as means of making schools more accountable and thereby improving both their performance and the State's human capital (Macbeth and Ravn 1994 p.3; Cullingford 1996a p.1; INTO 1997 p.114; OECD 1997 pp.26-7). Others see it as an ideology to regulate parents in relation to their children's education (Carlen *et al.* 1992; Ozga 2000). The OECD (1997 p.52), while aware of the different meanings and interpretations, described it as " a *process* (their italics) – learning to work together and valuing what each partner can bring to the relationship". Concepta Conaty, the National Coordinator of the HSCL scheme interpreted partnership as follows:

> Partnership presupposes equality and implies that the relationship has been formed on the basis that each has an equally important contribution to make to the whole. It implies a commitment to working together, exploring possibilities, planning, decision-making and on-going evaluation..... Partnership as a way of working is challenging and calls for changes in individual and corporate attitudes, methods of work and structure, particularly on the part of the school.
>
> Conaty (2002 p.71)

Partnership is often viewed as a form of democracy (Heywood 1997 p.69). People's definitions of partnership often correspond with their preferred model of democracy and their views on the proper relationship between the State and its citizens. For those who favour the liberal individualism model, the purpose of democracy is to lay down a framework of laws within which individuals are allowed to conduct their own lives and pursue their own interests. On the other hand there are those who believe in radical democracy, which allows people to participate in any decisions, which affect

their lives (Heywood 1997 p.69). Partnership, as operated in Ireland, tends to draw from both models. The legislation, curriculum and official documentation make up the framework of laws, within which schools and parents have to operate. Parents, through the NPCP, are involved nationally in drawing up these frameworks. They are also supposed to be involved locally through the BOM, Parents Association and the development of the school plan (Ireland 1998; DES 2006b; DES 2006c).

Underlying the national debate on partnership is the question: who has the ultimate authority as regards the education of the child? The fact that education and schooling takes place at the intersection of two sets of rights, those of the family and society, means that there can be tensions between its public and private benefits and goals (Department of Education 1994 p.5; Levin 2004). Article 42 (Ireland 1937) enshrines the principle of parental supremacy in the education of their children (Ireland 1992 p.32; Whyte 1992 p.84). The role of the State is to protect and promote the constitutional rights of parents along with a limited right to prescribe the attainment of a minimum education (Coolahan 1981 p.156). It also has the duty of providing for those children whose parents have neglected their duty (Ireland 1937; O' Sullivan 1992 p.465; Fuller 2002 p.75). However, in the post-industrial era, control of the education system is vital if the State is to ensure an educated and flexible workforce, which will sustain an efficient, competitive, knowledge-based economy (Department of Education 1995 p.207; OECD 1997 p.22; Esping-Anderson 2002b p.28; Hantrais 2004 p.100). In addition, a democratic society has the right to reproduce its most essential political, economic and social institutions through a common schooling experience (Levin 2004 p.172). As a result, there can be a conflict between the values and norms of the family versus those of the State (Coleman 1990 p.603). National educational policy normally promotes the public interest, while allowing as much of the private interest as can be accommodated without bringing the two into serious conflict (Levin 2004 p.174). The result is a tacit partnership between home and school.

However, problems arise because Irish educational policy debate can be quite restricted (O' Sullivan 1989; Kellaghan and McGee 2005 p.15). Frequently used concepts, like partnership, are rarely elaborated on or analysed sufficiently. Politicians and bureaucrats, according to Williams (2005 p.100), tend to agree on the public goals for education and avoid contentious topics that could give rise to genuine disagreement. Pragmatic improvements, high profile issues and catch-all slogans appear to be

preferable to genuine debates on values and ideology. Sugrue and Gleeson (2004 p.279) suggest that

> ... partnership had become little more than an ideological predisposition of key stakeholders in the Irish Education System who use it as a strategy to legitimate their interests and policies. As currently played out, it is flawed and suspect, particularly, from the perspective of maintaining and perpetuating power relations, and a generally cautious and conservative approach to reforms that tend to (re)produce *(their brackets)* rather than transform existing social relations.

Home-school partnership can be perceived as a symbolic policy. Its implementation, particularly the practicalities of how and when it is both appropriate and necessary for schools and parents to collaborate, are rarely addressed at national level (Kellaghan and McGee 2005 p.15). For the purposes of this research, educational partnership will be defined as

> The relationship between parents, the school, the State and the Catholic Church in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school.

While the formal alliance and contractual agreement, which Epstein (1992 p.1140) argued partnership implied, is not always present in these relationships, there is certainly an implicit and informal agreement to work toward shared goals (Sykes 2001 p.274).

1.7 Conclusion

Developing and implementing national policy is a complex and dynamic process. This chapter examined the context in which the national policy of home-school partnership was developed. The role parents' play in their children's education will determine their involvement in their children's education and schooling. The terms, educator, supporter, welfare recipient and consumer, were used to illustrate the values of parents, their relationship with the school and their interest and involvement in their children's education. The extent, to which parents are involved in their children education at home and in school, both formally and informally, forms a large part of this study.

Variables, such as citizenship, gender, social class, religion and family forms influence national policies and parenting styles. The impact of the changing cultural values and norms of Irish society parents and their involvement in their children's education is explored in this research.

Partnership has different meanings, connotations and applications depending on who is using the term. National education policy is developed through partnership between the State and the major interest groups in education, using democratic processes and dialogue. Parents and teachers are expected to work in partnership at local level. The issues surrounding the promotion of the concept in Irish education were outlined in this chapter. As the literature suggests that most parents prefer to be silent supporters, it will be interesting to note how many are active partners in their children's education (Department of Education 1995 p.9).

Having described the extraneous and personal factors, which impact on parental involvement and national policy, Chapter Two outlines the development and content of national policy and defines the criteria for evaluating its impact on parents. It also outlines key influences, both nationally and locally, which impact on its implementation.

Chapter Two National Policy of Parental Involvement

2.1 Introduction

From 1950 to 1970 the Irish class structure shifted from one based primarily on property ownership to one based on educational credentials and wage employment (O'Connell and Rottman 1992 p.218). The influences of the European Union (EU), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the State's own economic interests led to a questioning of the existing education system and the subsequent adjustments in power relations (Foucault 2000 pp.21-4) between the various stakeholders. Traditionally, parents had little or no say in education policy. The introduction of the *Education Act 1998,* the *Education Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1999a) gave parents the statutory right to be involved in their children's education and schooling. Policies, according to Crump (1992 p.419) exist in three forms. They include the

- Intended policy or what the various interest groups have decided and agreed on
- Actual policy or what is specified in legislation and other official documentation
- Policy-in-use or what has been implemented at school-level.

This chapter looks at the consultation process leading up to the *Education Act 1998,* the *Education Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a). The views of the various interest groups and their influence on the development of the national policy of home-school partnership are explored. Particular attention is given to the role of the National Parents Council Primary (NPCP), who represented the views of parents during the process. The details of the policy, as outlined in the various documents, are investigated. These will vary from explicit descriptions of responsibilities and duties to the loose granting of powers that may or may not be used (Hill 2003 p.91). Implementation is a key aspect of any policy. Issues surrounding implementation, which may impact on the policy-in-use in the schools, are discussed. Particular emphasis will be given to those aspects of the intended and actual policy, which are obscure on key points of implementation. The methods used to convey the policy changes to parents are also highlighted.

Indicators of parental involvement in their children's education and school were developed using the *Education Act 1998,* the *Education Welfare Act 2000,* the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) and other related documentation. These are used to

evaluate the involvement of the research participants in their children's education. Finally, using these indicators, the literature on the different types of parental involvement is reviewed.

2.1 Policy Formation Process

Apart from the last decade, the educational power structure and system did not change substantially in the twentieth century (O'Buachalla 1988 p.316). Monopoly Catholicism made the Church guardian of civil society and its morality (Fulton 2000a p.13). Education was provided by a system of Church-controlled, State-supported national schools (Redmond and Heanue 2000 p.45). The Episcopal ban on any lay involvement in the management of national schools excluded the emergence of any lay local democratic structure in education. Other groups such as the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) accepted as normal the Church's dominant role (O'Buachalla 1988 pp.323-4). This section examines the development of the policy from an era when parents were the 'silent partners' (O'Sullivan 1992 p.465) in the education system to one where it was hoped that Ireland would have one of the 'most parent-participative systems in the worlds' (OECD 1997 p.141).

2.2.1 Policy Formation Pre-1960

Pre-1960s the Department of Education was predominately occupied by political consolidation, cultural rejuvenation and spiritual values (Kellaghan 1989 p.191; Fahey 1992b p.386; Clancy 1995 p.481). Being conservative in nature, it took few risks and tended to view innovative proposals with suspicion (Harris 1989 pp.7-8). Control was highly centralised within the Department with the Minister for Education making decisions in agreement with the Minister for Finance (Coolahan 1989 p.28). The lack of public concern about the education system (Coolahan 1989) and the consistent reluctance within the country at large to consider any policy measure that might be seen to challenge the influence of religious bodies, institutions or even individuals (Harris 1989 p.8) did not encourage innovation. The role of the State in education was considered a subsidiary one of aiding the Church in the provision of education facilities (Inglis 1998 p.57; Clancy 1999 p.79). It adopted the approach of keeping the system

ticking over with little or no serious re-appraisal of policy or of the direction in which the system was going (Coolahan 1989 p.27).

Traditionally, two consultative processes worked side-by-side. The teachers, managers and the State dealt with lower-level issues relating to the existing system, e.g., resource allocation, curricular issues and working conditions. Higher-level issues, involving the modification of the structural *status quo*, were confined to the Church and State (O'Buachalla 1988 p.334). Parents were not included at either level.

2.2.2 Policy Formation from the 1960s on

From the 1960s on, education became part of the more planned approach to the general economy (Coolahan 1989 p.64; Kellaghan 1989 p.192). The OECD report (1965), *Investment in Education*, was a major modernising force in Irish Education. It was influential in promoting the human capital policy paradigm (Schultz 1977) and the emerging marketization of education (O' Sullivan 1992). Education came to be perceived as an investment in people with the parents' consumer rights in relation to their children's education promoted at national level.

With education credentials becoming increasingly important for employment, many parents began to view education as the means to secure their children's competitive edge in the labour market (Fuller 2002 p.171; Tuohy 2005). Through the constituency clinics and clientelist relationship they had with politicians, they demanded greater educational provision at post-primary level (O' Sullivan 1992 p.455). In addition, educated parents, fully conscious of their constitutional prerogatives, were no longer satisfied with the traditional model of management and policy formation whereby the patron was deemed to "act on behalf of parents" (Coolahan 1994 p.25; Clancy 1995 p.475; Fahey 1995 p.216). During the 1970s, a number of parent associations in various schools and at least two national associations were formed (Coolahan 1989 p.56; Hyland 1995 p.40). In 1985 the NPCP was established and has been remarkably successful in focusing and projecting the voice of parents (Hyland 1995 p.40).

As a result, the Department of Education became progressively more interventionist in modernising the system (Cussen 1995 p.46; Department of Education 1996 p.8; Fuller 2002 p.80; Tovey and Share 2003 p.89). The range of educational initiatives caught the public imagination and propelled education to the forefront of public attention (Coolahan 1989 p.66). The attention of the media and the vote catching

potential of educational reforms, which touched so closely on the daily lives of so many families, was not lost on politicians.

As the education system grew in size and complexity, a succession of reports highlighted its weak administrative and policy making capacity (OECD 1991). The changes in Irish society led to a strong public desire for new forms of partnership in education (Coolahan 1994 p.23). The catalyst for change was Mary O'Rourke, who as Minister for Education, announced in August 1990 that she was considering an Education Bill (Walshe 1999 p.7). One of her priorities was parental involvement. Circular 24/91 *Parents as Partners in Education* (Department of Education 1991), which recommended active Parents Associations, clear strategies for parental involvement in all schools and full participation of parent representatives on the Board of Management, was issued to all school. In addition the HSCL scheme was established in disadvantaged schools.

2.2.3 Home-School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme

'Equality of opportunity' became a most attractive and much used political slogan in the 1980s (Coolahan 1989 p.66; O'Sullivan 1989). In 1984, a programme of special measures for schools in disadvantaged areas was introduced. There was a *per capita* grant for books and materials, and additional home-school-community activities. In-service was provided for teachers in disadvantaged areas and concessionary posts and remedial teachers were appointed. The evaluation showed that it had no impact on parental involvement (Conaty 2002 p.29).

In 1990 the HSCL Scheme, which was influenced by Catholic social teaching, the United Nations and the EU (Conaty 2002), was introduced. Through it, the Department of Education wished to develop the parent as the primary educator and promote partnership between teachers and parents in order to help 'at risk' pupils *(her apostrophes)* (Conaty 2002 p.29). The aim of the scheme was to maximise the participation of the children in the education system by promoting active co-operation between home and school and encouraging and helping parents to take an interest in and support their children's education (Ryan 1994 p.6). The HSCL scheme was designed as a targeted and focused resource in favour of the most marginalised in designated areas of disadvantage (Conaty 2002 p.30). Its thrust is preventative rather than curative (Conaty 2002 p.72).

The HSCL coordinator is expected to work with and fortify the family so that instances of absenteeism and disruption will be obviated thus preventing illiteracy, unemployment, drug misuse, jail and psychological collapse (Conaty 2002 p.75). Classes are provided in personal development along with leisure time and curriculum activities and parents are involved in school-related activities. The aim is to encourage parents away from dependency and enable them to make decisions in relation to their own lives and those of their children (Conaty 2002 p.75).

In 1996, parent and teachers began working together on policy formation (Conaty 2002 p.98). The first policy to be worked on was HSCL relationships and practices. As a School Development Planning Support (SDPS) facilitator, I would have noticed that, in comparison with mainstream schools, parents were more likely to attend the SDPS planning day in disadvantaged areas. The HSCL coordinator usually helps to ensure that parent participation is built in to the planning process at some stage.

The two evaluations of the HSCL scheme (Ryan 1994; Archer and Shortt 2003) have been positive about its impact on home-school relationships. Ryan (1994 p.134) found that parents were overwhelming positive about the HSCL scheme. Not only had their understanding of the operation of the school increased, but they had developed the self-esteem, self-confidence and skills to help their children. Their fears about school were diminishing and there was an increase of community spirit and pride as a result of the collaborative efforts of schools, parents and community groups. Similarly, Archer and Shortt (2003) found that coordinators and principals believed that the scheme had been successful in achieving its aims of improving home-school cooperation and collaboration. However, the inspectorate, in their evaluation of literacy and numeracy in disadvantaged schools (DES 2005a p.63) found that, despite the HSCL initiative, parental involvement remained poor, particularly in the middle and senior classes. As a result there has been a renewed emphasis on involving parents in their children's education in the DEIS Action Plan (DES 2005d p.40).

Parents who became involved in the HSCL activities were largely female (Ryan 1994 p.197; Conaty 2002 p.112). In addition, the least disadvantaged parents were more likely to become involved in HSCL activities (Ryan 1994 p.198; Conaty 2002 p.101). The reasons why parents did not become involved were varied. They included personal problems, work and family commitments, fear and uncertainty regarding schools and lack of information (Ryan 1994 p.135; Purcell 2006 p.9). Archer and Shortt (2003

p.114) recommended that new ways of securing the involvement of previously uninvolved parents were needed.

2.2.4 Policy Formation from 1992-1998

The publication of the Green Paper *Education for Changing World* (Ireland 1992) initiated an extraordinary response (Walshe 1999 p.31) and an unprecedented consultation process (Clancy 1999 p.72). Along with innumerable seminars and conferences, there were about 1,000 written submissions which reflected the strong business and enterprise thrust of the paper, as well as the growing public interest in education as a vehicle for personal and societal advancement (Fahey 1995; Fuller 2002 p.173; Tuohy 2005 p.114).

A key aim of the Green Paper was to ensure greater openness and accountability throughout the education system and maximise parental involvement and choice (Ireland 1992 p.5). Parents, it stressed, were the primary educators of their children and had a crucial role to play in forming the attitudes of their children towards all facets of life. This task was complemented by the efforts of the State and the school (Ireland 1992 p.32). It identified the lack of openness and sharing of information and power with parents as a major shortcoming in the system. Schools, it argued, must have due regard for the rights and wishes of parents and had an obligation to consult and inform parents on issues affecting their own child and the school generally.

Usually, a Green Paper is followed by a White Paper. However, with the change of government, the then Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, decided to hold a National Education Convention where forty-two interest groups and organisations, including the CPSMA (Catholic Primary School Managers' Association), the INTO and the NPCP, were brought together to discuss Irish educational policy (Clancy 1999 p.72). The aim was to move away from the department's traditional method of negotiating policy changes with each group individually to negotiating 'win-win' solutions through structured multi-lateral dialogue (Bhreathnach 1995 p.ix; Walshe 1999 p.37). It was followed by roundtable discussions on the thorny issue of school governance.

The Convention achieved a fair degree of consensus and gave the stakeholders a sense of ownership of the proposals (Walshe 1999 p.40). The Convention Secretariat's Report (Coolahan 1994) formed a major input to the 1995 White Paper *Charting our Education Future* (Department of Education 1995) (Walshe 1999 p.44). It specified that parents, under Article 42 of the Constitution (Ireland 1937), have the right as individuals

to be consulted and informed on all aspects of their child's education. They also had the right as a group to be active participants at school, regional and national level (Department of Education 1995 pp.8-9). If the values and beliefs of teachers conflict with the rights of parents, the school should favour the parents' rights with due regard to the principle of democratic justice appropriate to a democratic society. The preservation of the ethos of the school and the rights of the majority of parents were to be balanced with those of the minority of parents, who do not have an option to select a school, which reflects their values. Communication and consultation with parents was emphasised. Parents could participate formally through the NPCP at national level and the Board of Management (BOM) and Parents Associations at local level. Informally, they were to be involved through the development of school policies, the provision of information on school programmes, access to their own child's records and other home-school links.

The White Paper on Education (Ireland 1995) set the formulation of educational policy in a European, international and global context and outlined the appropriate legislative and constitutional framework for future educational development (Department of Education 1995 pp.213-419). It was felt that its mixture of general principles and detailed guidelines, which would be reinforced by regulations, rules and directives (Department of Education 1995 p.220), would allow the policy to develop in a dynamic way (Cussen 1995 p.42). The publication of the White Paper (Ireland 1995) led to further dialogue and negotiations culminating in the *Education Act 1998*, the *Education Welfare Act 2000* and other legislation.

2.2.5 Board of Management Reform

Despite the Catholic Church actively supporting the setting up of structures, (Hyland 1995 p.37), whereby control and management of schools might be shared with parents, no formal management structures were put in place. In 1973, negotiations got underway between Church interests, teacher union representatives and parents' groups (Coolahan 1989 p.56). These negotiations were quite difficult as the various interest groups tried to protect or secure power and influence. Finally, in 1975 new BOMs, comprising of four patron nominees and two parents, were established (Walshe 1999 p.89). Initially teachers were excluded but following discussions, arrangements were made for limited teacher representation. In 1980, following the withdrawal of the INTO from participation on BOMs, the number of patrons' nominees were reduced from six to

four. The BOMs would consist of four patron nominees, two parents and two teachers (Walshe 1999 p.90). The patron retained the right to appoint the chairperson of the board, who would have a second or casting vote.

BOM regulations were published. These emphasised the administrative and financial responsibilities of the board, which were not to impinge on curricular or formal educational policy (Coolahan 1989 p.57). Some parents expressed dissatisfaction at the restricted range of responsibilities of the BOMs and chafed at being cast in the role of local fundraisers without the real power to influence the school's educational policy (Coolahan 1989 p.58).

The structure of the BOM and its role featured strongly in the *Report of the Primary Education Review Body* (1990) and during the consultation process leading up to the *Education Act 1998* (Ireland 1992; Coolahan 1994; Department of Education 1995). The aim was to bring the governance of schools into line with the very changed economic, social and political circumstances (Coolahan 1994 p.23). Schools needed a more democratic management structure, which would represent all stakeholders and have the necessary authority to perform its management functions effectively (Ireland 1992 p.141). In practice this meant that the patrons/trustees would be ceding many of their powers and functions to the BOM. The bishops and religious were dissatisfied with this and saw it as an attempt by the State to push the Church out of education (Walshe 1999 pp.107-9). To safeguard the religious ethos and character of their schools (Coolahan 1994 pp.24-6), the patrons wished to appoint majorities on the board and nominate the chairperson. However, both the INTO and the NPCP favoured equal representation. It is interesting that the NPCP's proposals for equal representation of owners/trustees, parents and teachers, who would together nominate two further members formed the basis for further discussion (Walshe 1999 p.110). In 1996 agreement was reached. There would be equal representation on the BOMs in return for written legal guarantees protecting the ethos of the schools (Walshe 1999 p.112).

2.2.6 *Education Act 1998*

The shift in power relations was highlighted by those organisations the minister chose to consult with prior to publication of the Education Bill 1997. They included the INTO, the NPCP and the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI). The Catholic bishops, who once held a veto on all major decisions about education, were excluded. However, there was an unprecedented coalition of religious interests against the Bill and

the erosion of the rights of patrons as owners of primary schools (Walshe 1999 pp.191-6). The only group, which welcomed the Bill, was the NPCP, as it contained a section promising a complaints procedure whereby parents and students could appeal school decisions. This caused considerable concern to teachers. A series of amendments to the Bill were proposed with the first one being announced, interestingly enough, by the minister at the parents' conference. The new Education Bill was a much less controversial, more teacher-friendly and, perhaps, less parent-friendly than the previous version (Walshe 1999 p.208). Lynch (1999 p.298) maintained that it reflected the interests of the middle and upper classes of society, who are closely integrated, both directly and indirectly, into the educational decision-making machinery of most states.

The *Education Act 1998* placed the education system on a statutory basis. The roles and functions of the various stakeholders were delineated and it gave statutory recognition to the process of negotiating education change through partnership. The Minister for Education was expected to consult with the NPCP and the other educational partners prior to making a decision. Each school had to have a school plan (Ireland 1998 p.22). Parents were to be consulted during the development of this plan and entitled to have access to the completed plan. In addition, Section 28 of the *Education Act 1998* outlined a complaints procedure for parents, while Section 29 allows parents to appeal expulsions, suspensions and refusals to enrol students.

2.2.7 Education Welfare Act 2000

Under the *School Attendance Act 1926* attendance at school was made compulsory but, as Article 42.2 made clear, it was not obligatory provided parents made educational provision for their children in their homes (Coolahan 1981 p.157). Absenteeism, with or without parental knowledge and consent, has been identified as a major contributory factor to school failure and disadvantage (Department of Education 1994; McSorley 1997; Commission on the Family 1998 p.285). Poor attendance and early school leaving, with the associated risks of unemployment and anti-social behaviour, were highlighted as major priorities in the Green Paper on Education (Ireland 1992).

A review of the *School Attendance Act 1926* and the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies involved was part of the preparatory work for the new legislation in education (Ireland 1992 p.58). The *School Attendance/Truancy Report* (Department of Education 1994), which specified the problems with the current legislation, led to the

development of the *Education Welfare Act 2000.* Its focus was on addressing the underlying causes of school absenteeism through early identification of and support for families whose children may be at risk of developing poor school attendance (Finneran 2000 p.9). The National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), who would have responsibility for ensuring that each child receives a 'minimum education' (Ireland 2000 p.9), was to be established under the Act. It was required to promote in families an appreciation of the benefits of education, and its attendant social and economic advantages. The *School Attendance/Truancy Report* (Department of Education 1994 pp.24) suggested that the NEWB could, by cooperating with other agencies, assist parents in becoming more involved in their children's education.

Under the *Education Welfare Act 2000* (Pr.III S.17 (1) p.16) parents are legally obliged to send their child to school on each school day. Principals must report if a child is absent for twenty days or has been suspended for six days in the school year. The *School Attendance/Truancy Report* (Department of Education 1994 p.17) felt that given the Constitutional emphasis on the principle of parental supremacy in relation to the education of their children, parents are culpable, not only for their own actions or inaction in respect of the child's non-attendance, but also for any intentional act of the child in not attending school.

While the *Education Welfare Act 2000* largely targeted children whose non-attendance was related to home-based factors such as long-term and intergenerational unemployment, addiction problems and familial conflict, it has also affected middle-class non-attendees whose families take holidays during term time. While, Forde Brennan (2003 p.4), Chairperson of the NPCP, maintained that it was not in keeping with the intentions of the Act that parents are threatened with the Education Welfare Officer (EWO) if their child has been absent from school, the principal has no choice under the legislation. In fact, the *School Attendance/Truancy Report* (Department of Education 1994 pp.13-4) highlighted the non-attendance of children at school, for reasons such as family circumstances (minding young children, shopping trips or foreign holidays) or economic necessity (helping with 'selling' at particular times of the year), as a form of parental negligence. However, the parents interviewed in Carlen *et al.*'s (1992 p.137) research believed that the law was unrealistic in holding them responsible for their children's failure to attend school regularly. They cited a multitude of social disabilities, such as the overburdening anxieties connected with unemployment, poverty,

illness and other family responsibilities, to explain their inability to persuade their child to attend school regularly.

The *Education Welfare Act 2000* is an attempt to address the issue of absenteeism. However, 10% of primary school pupils missed twenty or more days in the school year 2004-5 with the NEWB issuing the first School Attendance Notices (SAN) in 2005(NEWB 2005). The SAN resulted in several court cases in various parts of the country in 2006 (NEWB 2006). These parents had failed over time to co-operate with the Education Welfare Officers (EWO) and the NEWB felt that the court cases were necessary to uphold these children's right to an education.

The *Education Welfare Act 2000* (Pr.III S.23 (4) p.21) has also a section on school's Code of Behaviour. It states, that prior to registering a student, the school must provide the parents with a copy of its Code of Behaviour. Schools may also require the parent to confirm in writing that the code is acceptable to them and that they will make all reasonable efforts to ensure their child complies with the code. It appears that schools are entitled to parental support in this matter (Department of Education 1995 p.163).

2.2.8 *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999)

The review of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (Department of Education 1971) by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) began in autumn 1991. While reiterating the objectives of the 1971 Curriculum, it also took account of the rapid social, scientific and technological changes and of Ireland's position internationally (Department of Education 1995 p.20). Committees, which included representatives of all the education partners, were established in all subject areas (Egan 1998 p.13). While the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) has been described as a teachers' curriculum (O'Toole 1999 p.3; Sugrue 2004 p.202), parents did have an influence on the planning and implementation of the curriculum through their representatives on the NCCA (Kilfeather 2003 p.243) and the Implementation Group (Egan 1998 p.4). However, they were not part of the Technical Working Group, which consisted of representatives of the DES, the NCCA, the INTO and the Education Centre Network. In addition, parents' low level of representation on the various committees weakened their impact, particularly when the teacher representatives were perceived as 'the experts' (De Paor 2003 apostrophes in the original).

Reform efforts and curriculum policymaking are subject to parental pressure (Oakes *et al.* 2000 p.82; McNamara Horvat *et al.* 2003 p.20). School improvement

efforts are often defeated, Hargreaves (2000 pp.225-6) observed, by "parental nostalgia", which "drives parents to press teachers to return to and reinstate 'real schooling' for their own children". After analysing the results of school effectiveness studies, Coleman (1998 pp.16-7) concluded that reform required changing the power relationship between teachers, students and parents to ensure collaborative teaching and learning. Recent evaluations of the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) have not been encouraging. The evaluators found that the linkage between home and school in children's learning was limited, particularly in the middle and senior classes and in Maths and Visual Arts (DES 2005a p.30; 2005b p.49). In addition to schools finding ways to support parental involvement (DES 2005a p.63; 2005b p.54), greater information was needed by parents on the curriculum if they were to support their children's learning in different subjects (FitzPatrick 2005 p.25; NCCA 2005 p.246). The NCCA have since produced a DVD to inform parents about their child's learning through the curriculum and to show them how they can support that learning in simple, effective and practical ways at home (NCCA 2006a p.7).

2.2.9 Parental Roles and Responsibilities as defined by Acts and Curriculum

Duncan (1993 p. 440) suggested that principles relating to parental rights and duties are necessarily expressed in broad terms in legislation. However, the *Education Act 1998* and the *Education Welfare Act 2000* are fairly specific, with the documentation accompanying them even more specific. If laws have surveillance, management and control functions (Giddens 2001 p.205; Jamieson and Cunningham-Burley 2003 p.15), it is interesting to note the similarities, nuances and differences in the descriptions of parental roles and responsibilities in each of the three documents (Table 1.1 p.46).

The *Education Act 1998* gave statutory recognition to the NPCP and enshrined the rights of parents to be consulted and informed on various aspects of school organisation, including their children's records, school plans, policies and accounts. It does not set out the role and responsibilities of parents in relation to their children's education. While no offence or sanction for non-compliance is mentioned in the Act, parents will have recourse to Sections 28 and 29, the complaints and appeals procedures (INTO 2001 pp.8-9).

The *Education Welfare Act 2000* replaces the *School Attendance Act 1926* and subsequent related pieces of legislation. It places a statutory obligation on parents to ensure their children attend school. There are penalties for parents who do not fulfil their

obligations under the Act. Parents must also be involved in the development of the Code of Behaviour and the attendance policy.

The *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a pp.21-2), while rather vague on the parents' role in curriculum implementation, emphasises home-school communication and the active participation of parents in the life of the school. In the *Education Act 1998,* the Minister for Education and Science, on advice from the NCCA, has the right to determine both the content and delivery of the curriculum and may compel the BOM to follow it (Gaire and Mahon 2005 p.145). Parents may withdraw their children from any subject that is contrary to their conscience but have no right to have any subject inserted in the curriculum (Gaire and Mahon 2005 p.145). Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), which includes Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), is the only curriculum subject where schools are expected to involve parents in the development of the curriculum plan (DES 2003b) and keep them fully informed of the content and teaching approaches (DES 2000a p.38).

Table 1.1
Summary of Acts and Curriculum in relation to Parents

Education Act 1998	Education Welfare Act 2000	Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999a p.21)
BOM: – Manage the school for the benefit of students and their parents – Enrolment Policy – Inform/ report to parents using school plan – Consult with parents – Access of parents to pupil's records and school accounts Principal: – Involve parents – Inform parents of pupil's progress Parents Association: – Interests of pupil – Advise Principal/BOM – Programme of Activities Grievance Procedure Appeals Procedure	Home schooling: - Register of children not in school - Inspection of their education Schools: - Register of children in each school - Attendance or reason for absence - Reporting absences to EWO - School Attendance Strategies - Code of Behaviour - Sign Acceptance The NEWB: - Procedures for non-compliance - Duties of the NEWB - Register of young people in employment	School/parents groups are to reach out to help parents to do the following: - Effective partnership and close co-operation - Regular consultation - Involved in organisational planning - Active participation in life of the school - Create and foster positive school spirit - Sense of belonging and interest

The *Education Welfare Act 2000* is looking for compliance on school attendance while the *Education Act 1998* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) are more visionary and developmental, articulating the values and future direction of the Irish education system. As the legislation and curriculum are lengthy documents written in legalistic and professional language, information booklets (Table 1.2) for parents were

produced by the various agencies responsible for managing and leading the implementation process.

While all three documents emphasise the role of parents in the education system, the content, timing and distribution methods differed quite considerably. The School Development Planning Support (SDPS) document outlines the SDP process and how parents can get involved in decision-making and policy formation in their children's school (SDPS 2004). The other two documents describe how parents can support the school and get involved with their children's education both at home and at school (DES 2000a; NEWB 2004).

Table 1.2
Summary of Documentation relating to the Acts and Curriculum

School Development Planning at Primary Level Information for Parents (SDPS 2004)	*Do not Let Your Child Miss Out* (NEWB 2004)	*Primary School Curriculum Your Child's Learning Guidelines for Parents* (DES 2000a)
Become active partners by - Election to BOM and Parents Association - Member of policy working groups - Links with child's teachers - Familiar with school plan, booklets and newsletters - Support school policies - Contribute to decisions by giving feedback through questionnaires etc. - Submitting comments or making suggestions	- Know principal and teachers - Read letter and reports - Attend P-T meetings - Ask your child about his/her day - Encourage school activities & sports - Attendance and punctuality - Do not pass on bad experiences - No holidays during term time - Know and discuss the school rules with child - Follow complaint procedures - Unhappy with expulsion/ suspension/ enrolment contact the DES - **"You can be taken to court if you do not co-operate with the Board to ensure that your child receives an education"**	Help child learn p.13 - Interest in progress - Discuss events/learning - Homework - Expectations and praise - Read/tell stories - Outings/concerts/plays - Different leisure activities - Active and helpful relationship with school - Communication - Participate in and attend school activities Role of Parents in implementation - Check school plan - Voice in organisational planning - Visit school to view work & attend events - Help at events, outings, library, involve others Help child at home in different subjects Overview of curriculum and activities to do at home to reinforce subject – SPHE - keep fully informed of content and teaching approaches – Home work – Textbooks (changes) – Assessment (no role mentioned for parents)

The *Primary School Curriculum: Your Child's Learning: Guidelines for Parents* (DES 2000a) was sent to schools to distribute to parents. However, three years later some schools had not yet distributed the booklet (Kilfeather 2003). *Do Not Let Your Child Miss Out* (NEWB 2004) was sent directly to parents using the children's allowance database. Schools were not informed and did not receive a copy until all were

distributed. *School Development Planning at Primary Level: Information for Parents* (SDPS 2004) was sent to the chairpersons of the Parents Association to distribute. Copies were posted to the principal and chairperson of the BOM and Parents Association prior to the delivery of the leaflets for parents. It was also available in public libraries and citizen advice centres.

2.2.10 Summary

Over the last twenty years, the Irish Education system had changed from one where parents had no say in policy formation to one where they are expected to be involved both locally and nationally. With the formation of the NPCP, they were actively involved in the processes which led to the development of the legislation and the curriculum. Parents now have the right to sit on BOMs, form Parents Association and to be kept informed of their children's progress and all matters relating to the school (Ireland 1998).

This research will note how successful the implementation of the *Education Act 1998*, *Primary School Curriculum 1999* (DES 1999a) and the *Education Welfare Act 2000* has been in relation to parents. Is there home-school partnership in supporting and planning for children's education?

2.3 Implementation

As the implementation process is more complex, long-term and demanding than devising a policy, strategies are needed at all levels to help mobilize commitment and effective action (Coolahan 1995 p.9; Fullan 1995 p.20; Taylor *et al.* 1997 p.16). Government edict alone cannot produce desired changes. There can be major gaps between the rhetoric of national policy and the reality in schools (Cussen 1995 p.51). Human diversity and organisational complexity create implementation difficulties with policies being ignored, resisted or rearticulated to suit local circumstances (Taylor *et al.* 1997 p.7).

The Minister for Education and Science has, under the *Education Act 1998,* responsibility to monitor and assess the quality and effectiveness of the education system. Ireland, along with other European countries, is adopting a model of quality assurance. It emphasises school development planning through internal school review by all members of the school community and external evaluation by the Inspectorate (DES 2003b). *Looking at our School – An aid to self-evaluation in primary schools (LAOS)*

(DES 2003b) is the framework to be used for both the external and internal evaluations of schools. If schools are to conform to the criteria as outlined in *LAOS* (DES 2003b), they should promote the following:

- Open, caring, respectful relationships
- Meaningful home-school communication
- The involvement of parents in their children's learning
- The involvement of parents in the school

Table 1.3 gives specific details on how these criteria might be implemented in schools. As many are recent innovations, they will be particularly useful in assessing the implementation of the policy (Spicker 1995 p.203).

Table 1.3
Criteria and Responsibility for Implementing National Policy

Activities *Education Act 1998, Education Welfare Act 2000, Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a)	***Looking at our School - An aid to self- evaluation in primary schools*** **(DES 2003b)**	**Responsibility for Implementation**
Inform parents	Ethos (p.4) Role and responsibilities of the BOM (p.5) All aspects of the school's operation (p.6) Code of Behaviour (p.9) Complaints procedures (p.9) Safety Statement (p.12) Content of School Plan (p.14) School Timetables (p.18) Implementation of SPHE Programme (p.37)	BOM, In-school Management, School
Election to the BOM		Patron
Inform parents of pupil's progress	Frequency of parent-teacher meetings (p.9) Access school records (p.9) Provision of written reports (p.26) Encouraged to respond to reports (p.26) Level and quality of liaison with parents (p.31-2)	Principal Teachers
Involve parents	School Review (p.5) School Plan (p.12) Monitoring process (p.14) Review and determination of school's curriculum (p.16) Determining needs and interests of pupils (p.17) SPHE and related policies (p.37) Seek their support and help (p.38) Joint training for parents and teachers (p.38) Policy and practice on parental involvement in their children's learning (p.38) Enable parents to participate fully in the education of their children (p.38)	School, Principal, Parents groups, Parents Association
Establish a Parents Association		BOM
Grievance Procedures/ Appeals	Parents are aware of the procedures for processing complaints (p.9)	In-school Management
Ensure children attend or give a reason for absence		Parents EWO
Reporting absences School Attendance Strategies Code of Behaviour	Prepare strategies and measures to ensure school attendance and a Code of Behaviour as required by the *Education Welfare Act 2000*	School, Principal, BOM, parents

Parents have to be informed and consulted by the school on all aspects of their children's education. In turn, they have to nurture a learning environment, co-operate with and support the school and other educational partners, and fulfil their special role in the development of the child (Department of Education 1995 p.9). As can be seen from Table 1.3 p.49, the school plan is an important element in the implementation of this policy on parental involvement. It is also obvious that the State relies on the school organisation for the successful implementation of this policy. All the activities described in the documentation, apart from sending children to school, are voluntary for parents. Neither the State nor the school have direct control over parents in these matters and cannot ensure compliance. Implementation is dependent on parental interest and the school's effort to attract and maintain that interest.

Families are not passive recipients of educational norms and policy initiatives (Carlen *et al.* 1992 p.480). Parents' prime investment is in their own children and families (Schultz 1973) and this takes priority over national policies and expressions of collective parental aspirations. Parents tend to be focused on 'hands-on' practical local concerns rather than far-reaching future orientated 'visionary' changes (OECD 1991 p.60; Moos and Dempster 1998 p.106). In fact, Moos *et al.* (1998 p.66) found that parents placed very little emphasis on change and change management. The OECD (1991 p.60) reported that parents in Ireland wished to see education develop in a concrete and positive way the aptitudes and qualities of the individual child – their own individual child. Wolfendale (1996 p.35) wondered if the multi-dimensional part parents play in their children's lives conferred a check and a balance to the fullest realisation of parental involvement in their children's schools. They are too busy providing for their children's physical, social, moral, emotional and academic needs at home to give a lot of time to the school's organisational and curriculum needs.

In addition, parents can often resist and disrupt change efforts, especially when they are made without their knowledge or support (Coleman 1998 p.157). New approaches need to be made transparent to parents through many different means (Hargreaves 2000 pp.220-221). Otherwise the result will be confused dissatisfied parents (Vincent 1996 p.152; Fullan 2001 p.197), especially those parents who have not got the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) to understand and take advantage of these changes. In addition to the voluntary expense of buying parenting books and attending parenting workshops and courses for oneself, the cost of new textbooks, equipment, additional field trips and events for children will have to be met. While grants are

provided by the State, they may not meet the needs of schools and parents if they are to fully implement the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a). Fundraising will then become more important than ever, with the INTO (1997 p.59) observing the difficulties in sustaining parental involvement and interest in the work of the school when they were effectively making up for the shortfall in government spending on primary education.

2.4 Indicators for Evaluating National Policy

The evaluation of a national policy poses a number of difficulties (Dye 1995; Spicker 1995; Hill 2003). The outcomes may be intended or unintended, wanted or unwanted, direct or indirect. While a policy measure may serve as a catalyst or a trigger for change, it can be difficult to isolate the impact of a particular measure or determine whether a policy in another area is producing the effects observed (Hantrais 2004 p.198). It is not enough to note the presence or absence of a particular policy measure. Its impact on the intended recipients also needs to be measured (Hantrais 2004 p.198). As Abrahamsom *et al.* (2005) found in their study of family policy across five EU countries, there can be a mismatch between the official rhetoric and the real-life experience of citizens.

The results of many studies and various efforts to define parental involvement, Epstein (1992 p.1145) argued, suggested that the following six types of involvement help families and schools to fulfil their shared responsibilities for children's learning and development. They are as follows:

- The basic obligations of families, which included building positive home conditions that support learning and behaviour throughout the school years
- The basic obligations of schools which primarily revolve around home-school communications
- Parental involvement at school particularly the school's encouragement of volunteers and audiences at school events
- Parental involvement in learning activities at home
- Parental involvement in school decision-making, governance and advocacy
- Collaboration with community organisations which includes networking by families

These categories were subsequently used by Esptein and Seyong (1995 p.122) and the OECD (1997 p.19) in their research on parental involvement in schools. They are reflected in the *Education Act 1998*, the *Education Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) (Table 1.1 p. 46) and the information booklets (Table

1.2 p.47), which inform parents of the legislative and curricular changes. These classic typologies of parents and education are considered by David (2004 p.221) to incorporate the normative notions of white middle-class traditional nuclear families. Initially these categories were going to be used as the indicators for the implementation of the goals of national policy. However, after the analysis of my observations as a parent, the pilot data from the questionnaires, interviews and focus groups and further reading and reflection, it was decided that the following indicators were more appropriate in the Irish context:

- Open, caring, respectful relationships
- Home-school communication
- Parental involvement in the home curriculum;
- Parental involvement in the school

These correspond with the overall policy goals as defined above from the White Paper on Education (Department of Education 1995 p.9) and *LAOS* (DES 2003b). The categories, as identified by the literature (Epstein 1992 p.1145; Esptein and Seyong 1995 p.122; OECD 1997 p.19), will be incorporated as subsections (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4
Indicators for evaluating the national policy of parental involvement in their children's education and schooling

Open, caring, respectful relationships		
– Collaboration with community organisations which includes networking by families		
Parental involvement in the home curriculum	**Parental involvement in the school**	**Home-school communication**
– The basic obligations of families, which included building positive home conditions that support learning and behaviour throughout the school years – Parental involvement in learning activities at home	– Parental involvement at school particularly the school's encouragement of volunteers and audiences at school events – Parental involvement in school decision-making, governance and advocacy	– The basic obligations of schools which primarily revolve around home-school communications *These include* ▪ *Children's progress* ▪ *Events and activities* ▪ *School Plan* *(DES 2003b)*

These indicators are explored in the next section and research questions, which will be used to inform this research, devised. These will be summarised in Chapter Three.

In the context of this research, it should be noted that parental involvement at local level existed prior to the *Education Act 1998,* the *Education Welfare Act 2001* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) and in many cases may not be solely attributed to these pieces of legislation. Irish parents have always supported the school (Hyland 1995). The lack of base line data prevents a detailed summative evaluation (O'Leary 2004 pp.136-7) but the evaluations of the HSCL scheme (Ryan 1994; Archer

and Shortt 2003) and the OECD (1997) report, *Parents as Partners in Schooling,* which included Ireland, will be used to assess the changes as a result of national policy.

2.5 Parental Involvement in their Children's Education

In this research, partnership is defined as the relationship between parents, the school, the State and the Catholic Church in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school. This is in line with the definitions of partnership at national level (DES 2005c p.15; Department of the Taoiseach 2006 p.74) with their emphasis on policy development and service delivery. Developing partnership requires an ability to 'overcome inbuilt inertia or resistant to change, conservative attitudes and beliefs, and confusion and lack of understanding about new processes' (National Centre for Partnership and Performance [NCPP] 2003 p.59). Parents' educational capabilities, their view of the appropriate division of labour between teachers and parents, the information they have about their children's schooling, along with the time, money, and other material resources available in the home will influence their involvement in their children's education and schooling (Lareau 1997 p.710). This section examines the literature on parental involvement in their children's education using the indicators described earlier (Table 1.4 p.52). The research questions, which are summarised in Chapter Three, are outlined at the end of each section.

2.5.1 Open, caring, respectful relationships

Partnership, like good parenting, is about the quality of relationships rather than techniques or practices. All relationships are negotiated and shaped over time and are influenced by wider forces such as employment, globalisation, social norms and views of what is right and proper (Williams 2004 p.17). Parents have to negotiate their relationship with their children as well as their relationship with the school. Both will have a bearing on their involvement with their children's education.

The parents' relationship with their children is very important if the child is to grow in to a well-adjusted independent adult. As can be seen from Chapter One, much of the research highlights the influence of parental characteristics such as social class, race, gender and family composition on their children's success at school. Children are often treated in the policy documentation as if they were the passive recipients of their parents' actions and values (Edwards and Alldred 2000 p.440; de Abreu and Cline 2005

p.719). The opposite may be the case. Children, especially as they grow older, may prefer to limit the involvement of their parents in their education.

Parents' relationship with the school will influence their involvement in their children's schooling. For most parents, their first reading of the school is in terms of how they are treated. The expression "feel of a school" is used to describe their initial impressions when they walked in the door or visited classrooms – the warmth, the welcome, their impressions (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995 p.31; MacBeath 1999 p.56). The sense of community, which is established if families feel welcome, may be affected by the rules around visiting and how these rules are enforced. Visiting a school can be very traumatic for non-professional parents who are not conversant with the language of education (Epstein and Seyong 1995 p.133; Headington and Howson 1995 p.94). A welcoming environment is rooted in attitude and demeanour of school staff towards parents. It can only be achieved, Lopez (2001 p.16) found, by breaking down the formal and bureaucratic barriers that surround the school. While parents appreciate a more open style of school (Glover 1992 p.228), the parents, in Cullingford's (1996a p.5) research, acknowledged that there were some impenetrable factors, be they content, relationship or ethos that cannot be measured. Even with the most publicly organised parents' evenings, schools presented barriers, with parents' own shyness or unwillingness to intrude in a professional organisation a constraint.

As the parents in Cullingford's (1996a p.5) research acknowledged, the ethos of the school has an influence on parents' perceptions of how welcome they are in the school. In Catholic schools, the values, practices and perspectives of the Church will be expressed as the cultural and institutional norms (Lodge 2004 p.32). No recognition or accommodation of different beliefs and practices may be made, particularly if they impact on school life (Lynch and Lodge 2002 p.140; Lodge 2004; Williams 2005 p.55). In addition, the emphasis on parental involvement in the life of the school may exert undue pressure on individuals to conform to the norms and values of the school (Hantrais 2004 p.192). As a result, parents, whose beliefs differ from these norms, may decide to remain detached from the school and its view of 'appropriate' parental behaviour (Vincent 1996 p.5). They may not feel that they have the same 'sense of entitlement' (Vincent 2001 p.348) in challenging the practices or decisions of the school as other parents. Until this power relationship is addressed and schools are prepared to accept parents as critical collaborators, the home-school relationship will be, according to Fine (1995 p.86), educationally bankrupt.

The parent-community intelligence network (Cullingford 1996b p.76; MacBeath 1999; NPCP 2004 p.14) and the 'parental grapevine' (Bastiani 1989 p.41) provide an important source of information and support for parents. While reflecting the dominant local norms, they influence parenting values and practices as well as students' attitudes, behaviours and achievements (Epstein and Seyong 1995 pp.119-120; Dyck 1996; Putnam 2000). However, this aspect of parental involvement is largely omitted from national policy and the existence, complexity and significance of these networks are often invisible to people who have no direct experience of them (Bell and Ribbens 1994 p.252). Networks are the most significant source of information for parents about schools and education (Wyness 1996 p.15; Gorard 1997 p.151; Bosetti 2004 p.395). For many parents in Lareau's (1997 p.712) study, discussions with other parents at their children's formal after-school activities influenced the way in which they approached their children's schooling. The bus stop, for the participants in Graue *et al.*'s (2001 p.482) study, was a cultural resource that provided opportunities for parents to congregate and share information about school programmes and events, about teachers and about what other parents were doing. The political organisation of the school was in many ways developed through these bus stop conversations. In Ireland, the schoolyard and gate are similar resources for parents. The NPCP (2004 p.14) encourages Parents Associations to promote networking among parents by arranging informal and formal events for parents to meet socially. Bosetti (2004 p.395), however, raised concerns about the accuracy and quality of information parents access through these networks.

2.5.2 Parental Involvement in the Home Curriculum

Parental involvement in the home curriculum is emphasised in the *Education Welfare Act 2001,* the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) (Table 1.1 p.46) and their related information booklets (Table 1.2 p.47). Parents, as the primary educators of their children, are expected by society to provide 'school-trained' children (Forehand *et al.* 1995 p.266; Wyness 1996 p.141; OECD 1997 p.25; Bastiani 2000 p.24). They must meet the developmental needs of their children for safety, security, routines and rules. As role models for their children, they must demonstrate consistent respect for all other legitimate authorities in the child's life (Garanzine 2000 p.249). In other words, parents have the responsibility to prepare their children with the necessary life-skills for functioning in school and society.

Much, if not most, of a child's learning takes place outside school, in the home, in non-school institutions such as sports clubs and in the wider community (Illich 1973 p.35; Bourdieu and De Saint-Martin 1974 p.345; Macbeth and Ravn 1994 p.4). The home is the prime locus for learning language, social skills, moral values and citizenship (Macbeth 1994 p.85; Macbeth and Ravn 1994; Wolfendale 2000 p.15). In addition, most children are involved in structured after-school and holiday activities like art, sport, music and drama as well as various community organisations like the scouts (Franklin and Madge 2000 p.23). These extra-curricular activities, not only provide educational and cultural benefits (Bourdieu 1997 p.47), but are a means of control by keeping children busy and out of trouble (Wyness 1994 p.205; Tomanović 2003 p.64).

Non-structured activities such as family outings, events and holidays, all contribute to the child's education. On a daily basis, parents informally educate their children about nutrition, hygiene, society, work and relationships. In fact, the children, in Tomanović's (2003 p.66) study, portrayed their parents as being preoccupied with schooling. This inevitable and constant home learning includes learning from the mass media, the neighbourhood and community institutions with which the family has contact (Macbeth and Ravn 1994 p.7). It can be acquired by accident, deliberately or by copying other members of the family who act as role models. One of the primary influences on students' attitudes towards school, Isherwood and Hammah (1981) found in their study of forty schools in Quebec, was their relationships with their siblings. Those who related to their siblings often and discussed a wide range of issues with them had more positive attitudes towards school.

The parents' role as educators is recognised in both the Constitution (Ireland 1932) and national policy (DES 1999a). The DES acknowledges the importance of home learning by encouraging parents to provide "high quality experiences for their children" (DES 1999b; 2000a) and by funding preventative initiatives such as the HSCL Scheme (DES 1999d) and the School Completion Programme (SCP 2004) in disadvantaged areas. The HSCL schemes aims to raise the capacities and skills of parents to enhance their children's education, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy (DES 1999d; Hanafin 2006 p.1; DES 2005d p.40). The SCP provides school meals, after-school and holiday time activities as well as programmes and supports to enable parents to take a greater interest in their children and their education (SCP 2004). In this way the State fulfils it obligation as the 'good parent' (Pinkey 2000 p.116), who compensates for poor or inadequate parents.

2.5.3 Volunteers and Audiences

This aspect of parental involvement in school is emphasised in the *Education Act 1998,* the *Education Welfare Act 2001,* the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) (Table 1.1 p.46) and the information booklets (Table 1.2 p.47). Fundraising; educational activities including homework and helping in the classroom; support at events; after-school activities; transport for outings and school maintenance were the main activities listed for parental involvement (Bastiani 1989 p.42; Vincent 1996 p.148; O'Neill 1998 p.18; DES 2000a; Zappone 2002). Formal occasions such as meetings, concerts, sports days, Cullingford (1996a p.7) found, were a way of underlining parental support for the school. Recognising that schools are under resourced and teachers overstretched, parents are often willing to help out (OECD 1997 p.28; Commission on the Family 1998 p.551). The report on primary school libraries (Library Association of Ireland 2002 p.39) found that fundraising by parents provided as many books as the local authority school library service.

Both the HSCL (Ryan 1994 p.25) and the OECD (1997 p.147) reports found that while parents were invited to organised functions and involved in extra-curricular activities, e.g., sports and cultural activities in some schools, there was little involvement in the classroom. Similarly, most of the parents who were interviewed in five locations around the country for the report on primary school libraries knew very little about classroom libraries. They had never or rarely been into their child's classroom for any purpose, never mind familiarising themselves with the library set up (Library Association of Ireland 2002 p.53).

Parental involvement in the school does not occur in a vacuum (Vincent 2001 p.349). Schools are "powerful agents of socialisation" (Martin 1997 p.67; Fine 1997 p.473). As children, parents received powerful messages, not only about the various roles and boundaries in school life, but also their role as parents. Parents in Graue *et al.*'s study (2001 p.477) used their own experience as students to set expectations and gauge their own child's progress. Traditionally parents were not involved in Irish schools. Therefore parents today may have few childhood experiences of parental involvement to rely on. In addition, their interactions and relationship with their children's schools may not encourage their involvement. Home-school meetings can be organised to ensure compliance, with opportunities to talk and ask questions limited. The architecture (gates, buzzers, seating arrangements), regulations (parking, access to the class teacher, Code of Behaviour) (Ritzer 2004 p.112) and systems of communication (Giddens 2001 pp.356-7)

of the school confirm to parents the role they are expected to play in their children's education.

Parental involvement is also set within personal work-related and domestic contexts. Most parents cannot and do not participate at the school building (Epstein 1992 p.1143). Time constraints, the age or grade levels of students and the life stages of families are important elements in nature and extent of parental involvement with schools (Epstein and Seyong 1995 p.122; Fletcher 1999 p.172). For others, poverty, apathy, parents' past negative experiences of their own schooling were contributory factors, with some perceiving involvement as primarily attending to the economic/financial needs of their families (Carlen *et al.* 1992 pp.137-8; Lopez 2001 pp.14-5; Zappone 2002 p.34). Changes in society and mothers' participation in the workforce raises serious questions about the need for new links between home and school (Graue *et al.* 2001 p.486; Archer and Shortt 2003 p.114). Schools, according to Feiler *et al.* (2006 p.465), will need a variety of activities that will suit different parents at different times. Such a mix, with families choosing what they are going to get involved with, carries with it the need for individual decisions to be respected and negative inferences avoided.

2.5.4 Decision-Making and Governance

National policy, as outlined in the *Education Act 1998*, *Educational Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a), promotes the involvement of parents in school decision-making and governance. Parents may become active partners by being elected to the BOM and/or Parents Association or by being a member of a policy-working group (OECD 1997 p.19; SDPS 2004). However, opportunities for getting involved in school decision-making are limited. Only two parents can sit on the BOM at any one time. Only 24% of primary schools in Ireland have Parents Associations that are members of the NPCP (Colgan 2003). Only two out of every five schools in the initial HSCL liaison report had a parents' committee (Ryan 1994 p.25). There was no mention of whether these committees were affiliated to NPCP. Neither the HSCL (Ryan 1994) nor the OECD (1997) reports mention parental involvement in policy formation. In fact, the OECD (1997) report found that parents had no influence on the approach taken by individual schools or teachers to the teaching of the curriculum. Since the establishment of the SDPS Service, there has been an increase from 8% to 14% in the percentage of parents involved in school planning (DES 2003a p.29). This

had mostly been in organisational rather than curricular areas. However, the inspectorate (DES 2006b p.81) suggested that school-based structures to accommodate the systematic and continuous involvement of parents in the planning process have not yet been established in most schools.

There are also question marks over whether parents who join these organisations are typical of parents as a whole and represent their views (Ryan 1994 p.198; OECD 1997 p.16; INTO 2005 p.57). Most parents are more interested in the advancement and activities of their own children than in school or system wide endeavours. Few wish to participate directly in school decisions or be active members of the Parents Association or BOM (Epstein 1992 p.1142; Macbeth and Ravn 1994 p.8; OECD 1997 p.41; Fullan 2001 p.215; Murphy 2002 p.85). In Coleman's (1998 p.148) Canadian study, parents dismissed parent governance as necessary or useful. They saw little connection between it and teaching and learning activities, which they believed were entirely controlled by the teachers. Parents in the evaluation done by the Inspectorate (DES 2006b p.51) held similar beliefs and felt that they were not qualified to comment or make a contribution to the schools' curriculum planning.

Similarly, a major feature of the school boards and governing bodies in England and Scotland was their strong trust in the head teachers' professional expertise and judgement (Munn 1998 p.386). Supporting the school and teachers was seen as their main role and they accepted the policies put forward by the head teachers. Only those schools that had head teachers who were committed to open and consultative management styles had parent representatives in their school development planning groups (Munn 1998 p.386). Even those parents tended to be guided by the head teacher's interpretation of the salience of the policy initiative for the school (Munn 1998 p.388).

Parental participation in school decision-making and governance is regulated by the use of power within the school (Foucault 2000 p.18). Collaboration between parents and teachers can focus on those areas of school life that are largely peripheral and uncontested in order to minimize conflict and maintain existing power relationships (Blenkin *et al.* 1992 p.52). While complying with the national policy of parental involvement, the school can involve only their 'good' parents who comply with school norms and can "be trusted not to rock the boat" (Simpson and Cieslik 2002 p.125). In addition, teachers can insist on their right to be the final arbiters of professional decisions in the school (INTO 1993 pp.112-3; Jenni and Mauriel 2004 p.189) with most studies finding that parents were usually informed about changes after the decisions had

been made (Bascia and Hargreaves 2000 p.14; Oakes *et al.* 2000 p.84; Eden 2001 p.103; DES 2006b p.62; 2006c p.31).

2.5.5 Home-School Communication

Under the *Education Act 1998* schools are obliged to communicate with parents about their children's progress and the operation and performance of the school. This was echoed in the other documentation. Research (Bastiani 2000 p.25; Gewirtz *et al.* 1995 p.9; NCCA 2006b p.13) shows that parents share the following common expectations about school. They want

- Regular, reliable and accessible information about what the school is doing and how it affects their children
- Information about their children's progress and achievements; about problems in learning, behaviour and socialisation; and especially about identifying ways in which they can support their children's learning

Personal contact between home and school tends to be selective and infrequent (Epstein and Seyong 1995 p.117; Vulliamy and Webb 2003 p.281). It focuses on identifying and solving problems rather than continuous, positive interactions with families. While parents can make an appointment to discuss their children's work or problems with the class teacher, there is normally only one report card and one formal parent-teacher meeting per year (Ryan 1994 p.25; OECD 1997 p.149). There may also be group meetings. These usually take place prior to enrolment and on other occasions such as parent information on school procedures, RSE, the sacraments and talks by experts (Ryan 1994 p.25; OECD 1997 pp.148-9).

General communication, using newsletters, and notes home, is normally of a fairly limited nature (Hughes *et al.* 1994 p.169). It concentrates on the practical side of school life – requests for help or other types of contributions, information about meetings or discussing lost clothing. Only rarely do schools and parents communicate about matters of central educational importance. Communication also tends to be very much one-way and under the control of the school (OECD 1997 p.148). Parents are rarely consulted or involved in decisions about the form and content of school-to-home communication (Hughes and Greenhough 2006 p.472).

Children appear to play a central role in communication between home and school (Lareau 1997 p.706; Tomanović 2003 p.54). Many educational decisions, Smedley (1995) found, were made on the basis of children's hopes and fears, fuelled by anecdotes and gossip carried on the playground grapevine. While parents may regularly

discuss school, class work and future education choices with their children, both Hughes *et al.* (1994 p.168) and Epstein and Seyong (1995) questioned how useful this information was to parents. As much of it was fragmented and incomplete, parents had little insight into why children were learning these skills or how they fitted into the overall curriculum. In addition, they were very much dependent on their children being 'reliable messengers' (Bridgemohan *et al.* 2005 p.7).

Parents' views about the value of home-school communication appear to be influenced by their relationship with the school. Most of the parents in Hughes *et al.* (1994 pp.164-5) study did not want to have any more contact with the school than they already did. Beside other commitments and the attitude 'It is there if you want it', there was also a pervasive feeling of intimation about approaching the school, either to obtain information or to discuss a particular problem. The parents, who were interviewed in the NCCA's study (2005 p.208), identified the class teacher as the first and main point of contact when they wanted information or help with their children's learning. However, all these parents were involved with the school and so may be the more 'conscientious' (NCCA 2005 p.226) or 'good' parents. While the participants in Hanafin and Lynch's study (2002 p.41) sometimes described the class teacher as being helpful, open and easy to talk to, home-school communication was more commonly spoken about as being inadequate, difficult, off-putting, excluding and frightening. They felt that the large class-sizes adversely affected the parent-teacher relationship. While these parents were described as being the 'interested' ones by the teachers, the researchers felt that they also represented some peripheral voices as they saw the research as a rare opportunity to express their feelings about the school.

The 'more marginalised' (Conaty 2002), 'unreachable' (Eivers *et al.* 2004 p.174) or 'uninvolved' (Ryan 1994) parents may be more like those described by Epstein and Seyong (1995 p.122). In their analysis of the data obtained from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 and the Hopkins Enhancement Survey, they found that one-third to two-thirds of parents, depending on the measure, were isolated or unconnected with their children's schools and uninformed about their children's class work, homework and curriculum content (Epstein and Seyong 1995 p.122). Not only did they not attend parent-teacher meetings, they often did not understand report cards and other home-school written communication.

Under the HSCL Scheme, priority is given to activities which enhance communication between home and school (Archer and Shortt 2003 p.81). Almost all of

the principals and coordinators felt that the HSCL scheme had a positive impact on the way the school related with parents (Archer and Shortt 2003 p.86). In addition, the NCCA (2005 p.208) found that parents in disadvantaged schools were more likely to be involved in activities that allowed them regular contact with the class teacher. However, the parents who were interviewed by Mulkerrins (2005 p.66) felt that they needed the support of the HSCL coordinator to communicate effectively with the school.

Parental nostalgia (Fullan 2001 p.214, Hargreaves 2000 p.227) and their stereotypical images of the 'good' school and teacher (Eden 2001 p.106 (apostrophes in the original) may impact on their communication with the school. Most parents operate their own surveillance system. They check their children's homework (Is it signed/corrected/given?) along with their books and copies (Do they have them? Are they used or unused? How do they compare to my friend's/sister's children?). Notes to and from school all convey messages about what is expected. Direct communication is not always necessary. Conversations at the school gate, comments made to children, remarks at meetings along with reports to the principal and/or outside agencies can be just as, if not more, effective.

The effectiveness of the school, and the teacher in supporting learning, is most often questioned when parents become aware of their child's inability to cope with the task set by the teacher and his or her frustration or confidence in the support received (MacBeath 1999 p.44). Parents' expressions of strong feelings on the subject of bullying and racial harassment touch on one of the more sensitive areas of home, school and community relations, and conflict of values (Wyness 1994 p.204; NPCP 2006 p.4). Uninformed of the school's policy, while yet aware of what was happening through the child/parent/community network, regular home-school communication is necessary to maintain positive relationships.

2.5.6 Summary

Using the research indicators (Table 1.4 p.52), this section explored parental involvement in their children's education. As relationships are a key element in the partnership process, this study will examine the home-school relationships in these schools. How do they influence home-school involvement? What impact does the school's ethos and the parents' values have? How are parents involved in the home curriculum? To what extent are they involved in their children's schools as audiences,

volunteers and decision-makers? As communication underpins home-school partnership, how does it support and encourage parental involvement in their children's education?

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the development of the national policy of parental involvement. The complexity of the educational system with its vast array of vested interests makes both the development and implementation of change a very slow process (Harris 1989 p.8; Coolahan 1989 p.61).The *Education Act 1998,* the *Education Welfare Act 2000,* the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) and related documentation were analysed with particular reference to the overall policy objectives and the rights and responsibilities of parents. Four indicators of parental involvement were chosen to evaluate the national policy of parental involvement. These were

- Open, caring, respectful relationships
- Home-school communication.
- Parental involvement at home
- Parental involvement in schools

The relationship between the participants in this research and the schools to which they send their children will be examined. The emphasis on partnership in both the consultative process and the subsequent documentation would suggest that parents and schools should be working together to support children's learning. Communication systems are important in establishing and maintaining this relationship. However, apart from ensuring that children attend school regularly, neither laws nor policies can force parents to be involved in their children's education. Parental involvement in schools can be seen as a continuum. It starts with the totally uninvolved parents who never go near the school to the parents who are active partners in both curriculum and organisational decision-making processes within the school.

This study will examine how the national policy as expressed in the official documentation is being implemented at local level. What aspects of the policy are working well? What changes or improvements are needed? What supports or impedes the full implementation of the policy? How could the policy be more effective in promoting partnership between home and school? The research questions and methodology is outlined in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three Methods and Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

Home-school partnership is one of the core principles underlying national education policy. "A range of measures aimed at fostering active parental partnership with schools" (Department of Education 1995 p.139) are outlined in the *Education Act 1998*, the *Education Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1999a) (Table 1.1 p.46) and the supplementary information booklets (Table 1.2 p.47), which informed parents of the legislative and curricular changes. These documents were developed through the partnership process at national level between representatives of the DES, parents, teachers, and managerial bodies.

There are four elements to partnership between home and school at local level. The first is parental involvement in home learning, which Macbeth and Ravn (1994 p.8) argue is one of the most neglected aspects of educational systems throughout Europe. Parents get very little credit for this work. The second is parental involvement in the school, which is normally initiated and controlled by the school. It can range from sending one's child to school to being involved in decision-making and governance. The relationship and communication between parents and the school are the last two elements.

Implementing any policy is a complex process and predicted outcomes are never guaranteed. Policies like partnership, which are deeply symbolic, and lack the necessary resource commitment and implementation strategies, pose particular difficulties. Implementation has been delegated to schools (Table 1.3 p.49) who differ in their motivation to involve parents. Moreover, even when schools are highly dedicated and have been given the resources to implement the policy, parents are not passive recipients. Neither the State nor the schools can compel them to be interested and involved in their children's education and schooling. As outlined in Chapter One, parental roles and identities will shape their interactions with the education system.

From the State and schools' perspectives, parents are seen as providers of the raw materials, namely the children, to help the State and school achieve their aims of educating the workers and citizens of the future. 'Partnership' on these terms means

supporting the work of the school. 'Involvement' means meeting the shortfall in resources, whether they are financial or personnel.

Parents, for the most part, are far more interested in their own children's welfare and education than in school or national issues. In this they are encouraged by the market-driven consumer society. Most parents are aware of the factors which support their children's learning and will use their 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) to ensure their children's success in school and life. Involvement in the school is on their terms and in the interests of their children. Partnership is a misnomer to them. They want the teachers to do their job and leave them alone to do theirs. The result is often a mismatch between national policy and the reality at local level.

This research will examine, from the perspectives of parents, the degree of parental involvement in five Catholic primary schools in North Dublin. The rhetoric of national policy as outlined in the *Education Act 1998*, the *Education Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) and other documentation will be compared with the perceptions and experience of these parents.

Parental satisfaction with the relationship between home and school will be investigated.

- Do parents feel welcome in the school?
- Are their views sought and listened to?
- How comfortable are they with approaching their children's teachers and/or making a complaint?
- How much of a say do they feel they have in policy formation and decision making within the school?

As parents need information to make informed decisions about their children's education, the communication system between home and school will be explored.

- What type of communication system exists between home and school? Is it two-way or one way?
- What is the focus of home-school communication? Is it on organisational issues or on children's learning?
- Do participants feel that the existing communication system provides parents with the amount and type of information they need to support their children's learning?
- How much information do they have about the curriculum and the changes in national educational policy?

Parental involvement in their children's education will be assessed.

- How are the participants in this research involved in their children's education both at home and in school?
- Do they operate as educators, consumers, supporters or welfare recipients?

- Are there differences in the involvement of parents from middle class and disadvantaged schools? What difference does the HSCL (Home School Community Liaison) scheme have on home-school partnership in the disadvantaged schools?
- How do variables such as family status, gender, age affect the involvement of parents in their children's education?

Evaluation of the national policy of home-school partnership at local level

- How is the national policy of partnership between parents and teachers in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school being implemented in these schools?
- What supports and/or impedes the full implementation of the policy?
- How could the policy be more effective in promoting partnership between home and school?

Evaluation of the national policy of home-school partnership at national level

- How much influence do participants feel that parents have at national level?
- What role does the State, the Catholic Church and the NPCP (National Parents Council Primary) play in their children's education?
- How informed are participants about national legislative and curricular changes?

3.2 Research Methods

Evaluation research is a complex field where the benefits of multiple methods are particularly clear (Robson 1993 p.185; Rossi *et al.* 1999). For this reason the case study method was used. It allowed the use of multiple sources of evidence ranging from the loose and unstructured to tight and heavily prestructured (Robson 1993 p.157; Deem and Brehony 1994 p.164; Gray 2004 p.124). The mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods allowed the exploration the diverse phenomena surrounding parental involvement and provided insights into the complex relationship, which exists between home and school (Cohen *et al.* 2000). This, it was hoped, would increase the credibility and validity of the research.

Researchers need to be explicit about the values and theories that inform their work (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994 p.122; Ali *et al.* 2004 p.24; Silverman 2004 p.64). I am a forty plus Irish middle class Catholic parent of four children, who attend their local primary and secondary schools. I am also a primary school teacher, having worked in a north Dublin disadvantaged school for twenty years before being seconded to the School Development Planning Support (SDPS) service. As a teacher, I had a lot of contact with parents through mainstream class teaching, HCSL and Early Start. As an SDPS facilitator, I support schools in developing and implementing their school plan.

Partnership between home and school is one of our core messages. At planning meetings, with principals, staff and occasionally parents, we discuss how parents will be involved in the planning process. These experiences influence my values, which are embedded in my research process and theories (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994 p.122; Silverman 2004 p.64).

Practitioner research (Anderson *et al.* 1994), a qualitative-ethnographic research method (Mc Kernan 1996), was used to collect data that was difficult to obtain through other methods. Through observing parents in my local community, the schools I worked with as a SDPS facilitator and my own experience as a parent, I explored the research questions. A research diary and field notes were used to record the development of the literature review, data collection and analysis. These helped me to reflect on the multidimensional nature of the policy of parental involvement. They were also useful in identifying and addressing bias (Strauss and Corbin 1990 p.95; Ruane 2005 p.71) in both the design of the research instruments and the interpretation and analysis of the data.

Indicators were needed to measure the impact of the policy. Therefore, it was important to identify and develop standards that were appropriate, credible and measurable (Robson 1993 p.178; Fink 1995 p.2). As outlined in Chapter Two, the following indicators, which correspond with the overall policy goals as defined in the legislation and other official documentation (Tables 1.1; 1.2; 1.3 pp.46-9), were used:

- Open, caring, respectful relationships
- Home-school communication
- Parental involvement in the home curriculum
- Parental involvement in the school

The categories, as identified by the literature (Epstein 1992 p.1145; Esptein and Seyong 1995 p.122; OECD 1997 p.19), are incorporated as subsections of these groupings (Table 1.4 p.52). These indicators, which were explored in greater detail in the previous chapter, will be used to assess both the implementation and impact of the policy (Rossi *et al.* 1999 p.20) in the five schools.

While one of the principal characteristics of policy evaluation is, according to Rossi *et al.* (1999), that its methods cover the gamut of prevailing social research paradigms, information from parents must necessarily be obtained by a survey. It was chosen because of its appeal to generalisability within the given parameters of the research (Cohen *et al.* 2000 p.171). As statements are supported by large-scale data from a representative sample population, it creates a degree of confidence in the findings. Interviews and focus groups were used to illustrate and probe deeper in to the findings

from the questionnaires. Much of the routine communication by the school to parents is through notes given to the children to bring home (Gaire and Mahon 2005 p.188). Documentation from the schools involved in the research was analysed. These included information booklets, newsletters along with notes sent home by the school. They gave an insight in to the relationship and communication between home and school. The data from these research methods was supplemented by the observations in my field diary.

3.3 Exclusions and Limitations

The focus of this research is on the extent of the involvement by individual parents in their children's education at local level. The role of the NPCP in the development of education policy at national level and its promotion of partnership with parents at local level is not explored. While the rights of Parents Associations are included in the *Education Act 1998,* these rights are separate to the rights of individual parents (Gaire and Mahon 2005 p.31). With only approximately 1,000 of the 3,200 primary schools in the country having Parents Associations affiliated to the NPCP (Kilfeather 2005 p.91) and the NPCP modernising to become more flexible and responsive to the needs of individual parents as well as those of Parents Associations, the operation of the Parents Association will not be a primary concern of this study.

The diffuse nature of the policy, the extended time frame, the application differences between schools along with the lack of a specific implementation plan makes it difficult to evaluate the national policy of parental involvement (Rossi *et al.* 1999 pp.51-2). In particular, the lack of base line data (O'Leary 2004 pp.136-7) makes it hard to evaluate the degree in which parental involvement has changed since the introduction of the policy. In addition, these changes may have happened anyway without the policy or even with a different policy (Rossi *et al.* 1999 p.239). They may be as a result of changes in society, the organisation of schools and parental values rather than national policy (Greenberg and Walberg 1998 p.174).

Schools are usually founded by powerful or autonomous status groups to provide an exclusive education for their own children, or to propagate respect for their cultural values (Collins 1977 p.127). The bulk of parents, at the time when the national policy of parental involvement was being developed, were Catholics, had Irish citizenship and sent their children to the local national school (Redmond and Heanue 2000; Gaire and Mahon 2005 pp.206-7). As being part of a distinct status group (Collins 1977 p.125)

gives people a sense of identity and belonging, I decided to confine my sample to parents who send their children to Catholic national schools. Parents who home school their children are excluded.

Since 1990, there have been major changes in the provision of schools and the diversity of the parent population. Educate Together schools, Gaelscoileanna and other non-Catholic schools have been developed to provide an alternative to the mainstream denominational schools (Gaire and Mahon 2005). Parental involvement is a major feature in both the establishment and development of these schools. These statements from the three representatives of the governing bodies highlight the differences in attitude towards parental involvement in these schools. Parents are welcome in Catholic schools (O'Connor 2005 p.91). In Church of Ireland schools, parents are perceived as having a key role, both individually and collectively, in terms of the development and support of the school and in drawing particular issues and concerns to the attention of the principal and Board of Management (BOM) (Mc Cullagh 2005 p.93). Apart from establishing and developing Educate Together schools, parents are encouraged to get actively involved at every level of the organisation, from organising extra-curricular school events, to serving on the BOM, to being elected as a director of Educate Together (Mangaoang 2005 p.99). As this may have resulted in a different status and power differential in these schools, they were excluded from the research.

Over the last five years, the number of international parents with children attending Catholic schools has increased. Due to language, racial, culture and religious differences, these parents have to cope with issues of assimilation and integration in Irish society. Consequently, the interactions between these parents and the school may be substantially different to those of the mainstream culture. The schools chosen did not have a large number of international children. Special schools were also excluded as they cater for children with special needs. They also use a different curriculum and have more State intervention and parental involvement than the norm.

Time and resource constraints confined the research sample to five schools. The context of the schools and the personalities of the stakeholders will have an impact the implementation of the policy. In addition, I was the SDPS facilitator for these schools. This was an important factor in gaining access and ensuring the support and co-operation of both the school and the individual class teachers. It was also important in persuading parents to participate in the study. Therefore, the results may not be generalisable to other schools.

Relying on parents to evaluate the impact of a national policy was problematic. In many cases, they may not be aware of the policy, the school's implementation of it or the impact it has had on them as individuals (Rossi *et al.* 1999 p.222). In addition, parents may be reluctant to appear critical of their children's schools and may be unaware of the extent of their involvement with their children's education. The lack of school records on parental involvement makes it difficult to verify their accounts. Therefore, while social relations and group norms will be explored, caution will be exercised in attributing the opinion of the participants to the whole-school population (May 2001 pp.125-6).

As highlighted in the literature review, gender and social class are two important variables in this study. Therefore, I tried to avoid gender and social class bias in both the design of the research instruments and the collection and interpretation of the data. The schools' status, as determined by the DES, will be taken as an indicator of social class. The research instruments were piloted with a school with disadvantaged status in order to minimise the class bias. However, it should be noted that while schools are designated by the DES as either disadvantaged or non-disadvantaged, the boundaries are not as clear in reality. Many parents from disadvantaged areas choose to send their children to non-disadvantaged or middle class schools. Other variables, such as the age of the respondent, their education level, employment and family type will be also be taken in to consideration.

3.4 Selecting the Sample

As time and resources did not allow a full-scale representative sample to be used, it was decided to confine the sample to five single sex Catholic primary schools in North Dublin. These were on the database of schools, with which I was working as a SDPS facilitator. These schools were within a three mile radius of each other. Three schools, a boys' and two of the girls', were in a middle class area, while the other two, a boys' and girls', were in a designated disadvantaged area. Both the disadvantaged schools were designated as DEIS Band 1 Urban, which identifies them as two of the 150 primary schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage (DES 2005d p.78). It should be noted that individual parents within these schools are not easily categorised. From working in disadvantaged schools, I was aware of the tendency of a lot of parents in disadvantaged areas to send their children to a school in a middle class area rather than

the local school. However, these parents tend to value education more than those to choose to send their children to the local school.

It was decided to take Hughes's (1994 p.194) advice on letting each family decide who would respond to the request to participate in this research. However, as gender and home education were important elements in this research, attempts would be made to interview a representative number of fathers.

Permission was sought from the SDPS internal management committee and the principals, Parents Associations and the BOMs of the schools in question to use these selected schools as a research sample. Two BOMs only agreed on the condition that the privacy of the parents was protected. Most principals reassured the BOM that I was somebody they knew and trusted. In addition, the informed consent of each individual participant was sought (Bhatt 2004; Sin 2005 p.278). Participants were assured that the information that they gave would be confidential and that care would be taken to ensure that they would not be identified in the final report (Ali and Kelly 2004 p.120). In addition, as the data from my observation diaries and documentation from my children's school was used to validate and reinforce the findings from the other schools, the principal and BOM of the school my children attended were informed of the research.

My role was one of researcher, active participant and author (Coffey 1999 p.116). Participant observation, using my own experience of being a parent of primary school children, was an integral part of this research. Initially I had decided to write in the third person, but as the literature review developed, I began to reflect on my own parenting and my involvement in my children's education and their school. When developing the research instruments, I realised that my own personal experience and knowledge of parenting was underpinning and adding authenticity to the study (May 2001 p.21; Ellis and Bochner 2003 p.212). Therefore it was important that I admitted my own subjectivity in insights and feelings (Neuman 2004 p.274), contributed and shared my personal experience as appropriate (Daly 2000 p.66) and used my own voice (Coffey 1999 p.132) by writing in the first person. With fieldwork having a strong impact on my identity (Neuman 2004 p.272) as a parent, it was important to engage in a high level of reflexivity or self-reflection (Coffey 1999 p.126; Darlington and Scott 2002 p.18) about my part in the research in order not to bias the findings (Greenberg and Walberg 1998 p.171). This meant continually checking that the findings were consistent and reliable by frequently referring back to the data, the research questions and the literature review. While I may be an atypical case in that being a teacher and an SDPS facilitator gave me

a degree of educational capital which most parents would not have, I was also typical in that I was not overly involved in my children's schools.

3.5 Research Instruments

Multiple research methods were used to ensure triangulation (Flick 1998 p.230; Cohen *et al.* 2000 p.112) and enhance the consistency and validity of the research findings. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from a large sample of parents (Babbie 1990; Thomas 1999; Balnaves and Caputi 2001; Peterson 2000). They provided an overview of the extent in which parents are involved in their children's education and schools along with their awareness of the changes in the education system due to national legislation and curriculum. This helped to identify overall trends and themes and to avoid the 'interviewer effect' (Alder and Clarke 2003 p.248), which adds another factor in to the data collection process.

Focus groups (Greenbaum 1998; Morgan and Krueger 1993, Bloor *et al.* 2001) and interviews (Seidman 1991; Fontana and Frey 2003) were devised to obtain more specific, in-depth, qualitative data from a smaller sample. This data included the participants' relationship with the school and the education system, their perceptions of their roles as parents and their views on national policy. The factors, which support and/constrain parental involvement in their schools were also examined.

Content or documentary analysis (Robson 1993) of the notes, newsletters and information booklets, which are used by the school communicate with parents, were analysed. These documents represented a reflection of reality and a method by which power is expressed and social order accomplished (May 2001 pp.182-3).

Participant observation (Eicheleberger 1989; Simpson and Tuson 2003) was used to support and inform the other research instruments. My anecdotal records (Mc Kernan 1996 p.68) and personal action logs (Mc Kernan 1996 p.110; Anderson *et al.* 1994 p.136) were used to record and study the dominant educational events and activities that I engaged in as a parent of primary school children over a period of time.

3.6 Observation

Participant observation, also called field research or ethnography, was used to explore the research question (Robson 1993 p.192; Creswell 2003 p.186) and learn

about, understand and describe the interaction between home and school (Neuman 2004 p.267). It enabled me to grasp multiple perspectives in a natural social setting (Neuman 2004 p.268) and was useful in identifying trends, patterns and styles of behaviour in both myself and others (Alder and Alder 1998 p.81; Simpson and Tuson 2003 pp.30-33). Its flexibility (May 2001 p.159) was a major advantage as I could alter my focus in accordance with my theoretical interests and analytic developments. The data was then classified and analysed using the predefined categories identified from literature review.

As description, which is a selective and partial process, is determined by the researcher's theoretical and conceptual assumptions (May 2001 p.160; Darlington and Scott 2002 p.75; Ruane 2005 p.167), particular attention was paid to the reliability, validity and objectivity (Robson 1993 p.195; Creswell 2003 p.184) of the observations. This meant basing my observations on the literature review and recording facts, statements and events, rather than opinions and/or feelings.

3.6.1 Data Collection

I used my pre-existing role as a mother to observe and record data on my involvement in my primary school children's education and school (Appendix 2.1 p.262) Periods of observation were decided on, with rough notes recorded daily. These were typed up and analysed on a regular basis. Initial observations were general and focused mainly on my contact with the school and networking with other parents. After the literature review was completed, I decided to focus on the home curriculum (Macbeth and Ravn 1994) and home-school involvement (Epstein and Seyong 1995 p.122; OECD 1997 p.19). This involved systematic recording using a fixed schedule, which noted the activity and the personnel involved. These observations were categorised under parental roles and types of parental involvement as identified in the literature review. These were central themes in the other research instruments. As the observation continued, the curriculum subjects were identified and recorded.

In addition to my own observations, other parents would be asked to keep a diary describing their involvement in their children's education, including their contact with the school, over a week (Hughes *et al.* 1994 p.164). A diary (Appendix 2.3 p. 264), similar to the one I used to record my own involvement in my primary school children's education, was devised. However, the pilot with an inner city disadvantaged school was not successful for two reasons. Time constraints and delays meant that it was not completed in time to send out with the main questionnaires and interview invitations. In

addition, the parents, selected by the HSCL teacher as being her 'better' parents, had difficulty completing the diary. Differences between the parents' perceptions as what could be considered educational and my own meant that the full range of activities would not be recorded. According to the HSCL teacher (IHSCL 22-02-06), the parents did not consider things like getting the uniform ready as being involved in their children's education. To them school related items were visiting the school, attending courses, meeting the teacher. The examples given in the sample diary (Appendix 2.3 p.264) confused them as they were 'amazed' that items such as going to the cinema and taking your child for a walk actually contributed to their children's education. The HSCL teacher explained that the school did "talk to them about it but they do not get it". Literacy was also an issue and assistance was required from the HSCL teacher to fill in the diaries. This created a bias as the HSCL teacher feeling that the diaries were 'illegible', not filled in 'properly' and that the replies were 'not fair' to the school, rewrote the diaries in conjunction with the parents. As a result it was decided not to proceed with the parents' diaries.

3.6.2 Data Analysis

Through observation and systematically recording the data in my diary, I realised the variety and intensity of the parental role. As a mother who works full time and is a part-time PhD student and involved in local community activities, I would have felt guilty that I was neglecting my children and their school. Parental 'guilt' (Mc Keown *et al.* 1998 p.208), the feeling that you could do more for your children, appears to be common and may influence the findings of this research. However, through observing the mundane, trivial, every day minutia (Neuman 2004 p.278), I discovered a vibrant, informal home curriculum, supported by both home and school, and a dynamic home-school communication system with the children at the centre. These findings are identified by their code i.e. the abbreviation for field notes [FN] followed by the date on which they were observed.

3.7 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were chosen for their versatility, time efficiency (Ruane 2005 p.143) and ability to provide quantitative data for triangulation purposes. As respondents answer the questions privately, there is less social pressure and interviewer bias (Gorard

2001 p.83; Alder and Clarke 2003 p.244). However, while the confidential and anonymous responses are assumed to lead to more truthful answers, there is no way of checking the identity of the respondent or if the questions were understood and the responses are accurate (Robson 1993 p.243).

An initial questionnaire was devised using the research questions and the literature review. Being aware that some parents may not have high literacy levels, the questionnaire was designed to be easy to read and complete. Closed questions (Peterson 2000 p.38; De Vaus 2002b p. 99-100; Neuman 2004 p.173) were used as they are quick and easy to answer and do not discriminate against the less literate respondents. It was hoped that they would encourage a high response rate with the choices acting as prompts and clarifying the meaning of the questions for the respondents. However, closed questions may obscure true differences or similarities in answers and responses may be ticked even when they do not really ring true (Ruane 2005 pp.131-2). Two open questions were included. One on the changes in education was left open so as not to bias the participants' responses. The final question allowed the respondents to write a free response to the research question in their own terms, enabling them to explain and qualify their responses to the closed questions (Cohen *et al.* 2000) if they so wished.

Questions were designed to be non-threatening and within the capabilities of the respondents (Peterson 2000 p.10; Neuman 2004) but yet specific enough to answer the research questions. Simple language was used as far as possible and specialized language such as technical terms, jargon and abbreviations was avoided (May 2001 p.106; Ruane 2005 p.127). A variety of question formats, including Likert scales, checklists, binary and multiple-choice formats were used to make the questionnaire interesting (De Vaus 2002b). Clear, simple instructions in different fonts (Peterson 2000 p.112; Gorard 2001 p.90) from the questions were used.

Both the cover letter (Robson 1993 p.271; Alder and Clarke 2003 p.245) and the front page of the questionnaire provided a context for the research. It emphasised the importance of the study and gave assurances of confidentiality and anonymity (Peterson 2000 p.105). My name, address and phone number were included so that respondents could contact me if they had any queries about the questionnaires or the study. As the questionnaires would be returned to the school there was a fear of participants over reporting socially desirable, respectable behaviour and conforming to social norms rather than true responses (Gorard 2001; Neuman 2004 p.170). Questions were

therefore structured in such as way as to make respondents feel that all answers were equally legitimate (Ruane 2005 p.129)

3.7.1 Pre-test

My husband critiqued and pre-tested the initial draft of the questionnaire and his comments were used to amend it. One question, which involved ranking items in order of their importance, was omitted completely as he found it very confusing and frustrating (Gorard 2001 p.102). On reading his replies, I noticed several discrepancies and instances of under reporting. For example he strongly agreed that women were primarily responsible for childcare. Yet he job shares and works evenings so that he can mind the children during the day, while I work full time. On question 6, he does at least three of the four tasks, which he said were done only by me.

The amended version of the questionnaire was e-mailed to the author's supervisor, regional co-ordinator and eight of the author's SDPS colleagues who were parents (Appendix 3.2 p.291). Being aware of the above gender discrepancies, this SDPS group were asked that both they and their partners complete and critique the questionnaire separately. This delayed the replies with only two of the questionnaires returned by the due date. In two cases, only one member of the couple completed the questionnaire. As a result, it was decided that only one questionnaire would be given to each household.

To ensure that the data could be analysed (Babbie 1990 p.225; Gorard 2001 p.103), it was coded and entered into Microsoft Excel. Excel was used because it could be used to process small data sets simply and quickly (Balnaves and Caputi 2001; Black 2002 p.252). Following analysis of the data, the questionnaire was amended using the results and suggestions made by the respondents. The questions were rearranged in a more logical sequence with vague, ambiguous and meaningless statements omitted (De Vaus 2002b p.96). Questions on the additional variables of employment, religion, educational attainment and citizenship were added.

Two ethical issues arose during the pre-test. My husband questioned the impact of the questionnaire on participating schools and their parents, particularly its focus on roles and responsibilities. The impact of the questionnaire on parent identity was reflected in some of the comments and replies. One respondent wondered if she should be doing all these things, while others used question eighteen to comment how parents can be interested in their children's education and not be involved in their schools. One

of the respondents mentioned that question five sent her on a "guilt trip" because she had a lot of negatives in the middle of the question. Therefore, this and other questions were rearranged to try to ensure that the expected 'no' answers were interspersed within the questions. Also, while the literature (De Vaus 2002b p.96) recommends discrimination within questions to ensure variation in replies, questions that would yield low variance were included in order to lessen parental anxieties and guilt feelings, avoid over reporting and ensure that the questionnaires were completed.

Due to inaccuracies and gender bias, question six, which asked respondents to allocate responsibility for school related tasks in their household, was amended. The respondents were now asked to report on how often they themselves completed the tasks. Interviews and focus groups would be used to explore gender issues in parental involvement in schools and children's education. An attempt was also made to shorten the questionnaire, as suggested by one respondent. However, as all sections were important to the research questions, none could be excluded. The font and layout of questions were altered to make it more user-friendly. As it took my husband approximately eleven minutes to complete the revised questionnaire, it was piloted with a group of disadvantaged parents.

3.7.2 Pilot

The questionnaire was piloted in a suburban two-teacher disadvantaged school in order to determine its social class bias and readability (Appendix 3.3 p. 277). Fourteen families received the questionnaires, the cover letter and a return envelope addressed to the researcher at the school address. Twelve questionnaires were returned within the timeframe, which is a response rate of 86%. There was no follow-up on the non-respondents. A Special Needs Assistant working in the school also filled out the questionnaire. All except one who replied were mothers. The data was coded and entered into Microsoft Excel.

Most appeared to have no problems answering the questions though the response rate to the two open questions was limited. Analysis of the data was used to make minor adjustments to the questionnaire. These included omitting 'making the school lunches' and 'taking your child to after-school activities' in question seven and strengthening the statements in two other questions.

One of the participants, a member of staff in a residential children's home, suggested that schools should use the term 'guardian' instead of 'parent' as not all

children have parents. This would help children realise that their parents are their guardians. As this might be confusing for the majority of parents who did not see themselves as guardians, the wording of the questionnaire was not altered. One of the teachers mentioned the difficulty of completing negative questions (Gorard 2001 p.96; De Vaus 2002b p.98), but these were retained to check that respondents were actually reading the statements and not just agreeing for the sake of it (Ruane 2005 p.140). A copy of the results was forwarded to the school.

As a machine was available to collate the data from the questionnaires, the format and layout was changed using the software Flips-OMR (Appendix 3.4 p. 285). Altering the format to ensure that it met the requirements of the machine took up a considerable amount of time and delayed the questionnaires going out to schools. The new style questionnaires were piloted on my sister and nephew. While they found the format easy-to-read and user-friendly, they felt some of the issues were irrelevant to busy harassed parents. For example, my sister's comments when filling in some of the questions, particularly about school plans and policies, were: "Do I care?" "Do I want to know?" As these questions were necessary to measure the extent of parental involvement in school decision-making and governance, they remained unchanged.

The final questionnaire consisted of nineteen questions. Questions one to four, along with questions thirteen to seventeen, were seeking information in order to develop a profile of the respondents and to be able to check if there was a difference between the replies of the respondents based on the variables of gender, age, citizenship, family status, religion, employment and education levels. The ages and life stages of their children were also asked. The relationship between the respondents and the school was explored in question six. Questions five and seven were used to examine how involved the parents were in their children's education and schooling. Respondents were asked to detail the extra-curricular activities of their children in question eight. Participants' views on their responsibilities and involvement in their children's education were explored in questions nine and ten. Question eleven sought information on where parents got support and advice on educating their children. Participants' knowledge of the changes in education policy was explored in questions twelve and eighteen. The final question asked the respondents if there were any comments they wished to make on parental involvement in children's education and schools.

3.7.3 Data Collection

The questionnaire (Appendix 3.4 p. 285) was delivered to the secretaries of the four schools in North Dublin on the same day. Each school received four bundles of envelopes containing the questionnaire along with a cover letter (Appendix 3.1 p. 285), instructions on how to fill out the questionnaire and a return envelope addressed to me. They were to be given out to the children in Senior Infants, Second, Fourth and Sixth Classes. The child would bring them home, ask their parents to fill them out and return them to their class teacher. The schools were given approximately three weeks to distribute and collect the questionnaires.

The response rate was dependent on the support and efforts of the principal, school secretary and the respective class teachers in each school. It also reflected to a certain extent the degree of parental co-operation with and support of the school. While two phone calls were received from parents expressing concerns as to what use would be made of the data, none of the schools experienced any issues with the questionnaires. All were highly supportive and expressed their regret that the returns were not higher. In middle class girls' school, the principal had explained the research at the Parents Association and there had been no objections. In the middle class and the disadvantaged boys' schools, some parents had asked if they had to fill them in and were informed that it was entirely up to them. The principal in the disadvantaged boys' school suggested that literacy may be issue. In addition, there may be survey fatigue as parents had already been asked to fill in another survey on their children's reading habits. In the middle class boys' school, additional questionnaires were found during the clean up for the summer holidays and these were included in the survey.

Two hundred and sixty four parent questionnaires, which is a return rate of approximately 62%, were returned from the four schools (Table 1.5). This is considered a good response rate for analysing and reporting (Babbie 1990 p.182). As the class sizes were larger, more returns were received from the middle class schools than the disadvantaged schools (Table 1.5). The difference in the levels of attendance between disadvantaged and middle class schools (National Educational Welfare Board [NEWB] 2005 p.27) may also have impacted on the survey returns.

It was difficult to assess the number of non-respondents for several reasons. While the percentage of questionnaires returned varied, these figures are based on the number of children in each class. However, as some children were absent when the questionnaires were being given out and did not receive one, there was in several cases a

discrepancy between the number of questionnaire given out and the number of children in the class. For example, in the sixth class in the middle class boys' school, there were 31 boys in the class but only 25 were given out. As all teachers did not return the unused questionnaires, it is difficult to gauge exactly how many were given out. In addition, parents, who had children in the other classes or schools and received more than one questionnaire, would have only filled in one form.

Table 1.5
Questionnaire Returns

		Disadvantaged Boys' School	Disadvantaged Girls' School	Middle Class Boys' School	Middle Class Girls' School
6th class	Number of questionnaires returned	**13**	**10**	**25**	**27**
	Number of children in the class	24	22	31	34
4th class	Number of questionnaires returned	**10**	**7**	**16**	**24**
	Number of children in the class	14	22	33	33
2nd class	Number of questionnaires returned	**23**	**13**	**22**	**24**
	Number of children in the class	37	21	34	34
Senior Infants	Number of questionnaires returned	**10**	**10**	**17**	**13**
	Number of children in the class	18	22	23	25
Total	Number of questionnaires returned	**56**	**40**	**80**	**88**
	Number of children in the classes	93	77	121	126
	% returned	**60**	**52**	**66**	**70**

3.7.4 Data Analysis

A unique identification code (Bourque and Fielder 1995 pp.80-91; Gall *et al.* 1996 p.294) was written on the back of each page of the questionnaire to ensure that the schools, classes and participants would not be confused during the data collection and analysis. Each respondent was given a unique number that corresponded to the code on their questionnaire. After several unsuccessful attempts were made to collate the data using a machine, it was decided to enter the data manually into SPSS. A handwritten

note was made of both the identification number and comment of the thirty-nine respondents who had written comments and explanations beside various questions.

While not every respondent answered every question, all are included in the findings. As the size of the various groupings differed, both the percentage and number of respondents are included. There was not enough variation to make valid comparisons between the vast majority of respondents who were Irish Roman Catholics and other social groupings. Some variables were combined as the number of responses was too low to give a valid result (de Vaus 2002a p.33). These included children under pre-school age, parents over forty, children who had left school. While comparisons were made between the different types of school rather than individual schools, significant differences between individual schools are reported. As percentages were rounded off to whole numbers to simplify the results (Booth 1992 p.112), some of the tables show totals of 101% or 99%.

The results were tested for significance using chi-square and it was decided to report all differences if they had a 5% (0.05) or less probability. However, some results that were not significant were reported, particularly when they were part of an underlying trend. With 2x2 tables, the results from the Fisher Exact Test were used rather than chi-square (Foster 2001 p.157). The expected number of cases in each cell was five or more. All the results, significant and insignificant, were analysed carefully and interpreted comprehensively (Eichelberger 1989 p.235).

The findings from the parents' questionnaires are outlined in the following chapters. Quotes from the respondents can be identified by their code i.e. abbreviation for questionnaire [Q], the number on the questionnaire followed by the abbreviations for the school's status [Disadvantaged (D) or Middle Class (M)]; gender [Boys (B) or Girls (G)]; and the class their respondents' children attended [Senior Infants (SI); Second (2); Fourth (4); Sixth (6)].

3.8 Interviews and Focus Groups

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which provide rich insights into people's experiences, opinions, values, attitudes and feelings (May 2001 p.120), were designed to follow up on issues from the questionnaires. However, while they allowed for the concentrated and uninterrupted focus on the perceptions of the participants (Darlington and Scott 2002 p.62), the results may be a product of the social dynamic

(Fontana and Frey 2003 p.64). Accuracy may be sacrificed in favour of the respondents trying to impress, please or manipulate the interviewer and each other.

Open questions were designed using the themes outlined in the literature review and the analysis of the pilot questionnaires. Prompts were written in italics. Open questions were used so that the data would supplement the more quantitative closed format of questionnaire. 'What?' and 'How?' questions were used instead of 'Why?' questions for their unobtrusiveness and their ability to encourage people to describe their experiences (Darlington and Scott 2002 p.57). While the questions were specific, there was freedom, if explanations were not forthcoming to probe beyond the answers (Robson 1993 p.231; May 2001 p.123) and look for clarification and elaboration on what was said.

The introduction contained an explanation of the purpose of the interviews, the importance of each person's views, and the rights of the participants to withdraw or remain silent (Sin 2005 p.287). The rules of the focus group (Ruane 2005 p.158) were explained. Permission was sought to tape the interview and to take notes. A closing statement, which asked for any further comments and allowed the participants to ask questions, was included.

3.8.1 Interviews

While the questions and format of the semi-structured interviews were similar to those of the focus groups, the interviews were intended to be more personalised and specific to participants' own experience of parental involvement in their children's education and schools. More flexibility would be allowed, both in terms of the areas explored and the direction of the discussion (Darlington and Scott 2002 p.49).

In the interviews, parents were asked about their hopes and fears for their children in question one. The factors, which influenced the decisions they made on behalf of their children, were also explored. The roles of parents, teachers, the State and the Catholic Church in children's education were studied in question two. Questions three and four examined the involvement of parents in children's socialisation and learning, both at home and at school. Question five probed the respondents' relationship with the school. Particular attention was paid to the home-school communication systems and how involved these parents were in the school. Participants were asked to outline the changes they had noticed in the education system in question six. Question seven was used to develop a profile of the respondents.

3.8.2 Focus groups

It was hoped that the social interaction of the focus groups would produce a dynamic and insightful exchange of information, which would spark ideas, aid recall and produce rich data (Darlington and Scott 2002 p.62). While group interviews take the pressure off individuals to respond to every question and reduce the influence of the interviewer, they may, through peer pressure, innate reserve and fear of potential embarrassment, interfere with individual expression (Fontana and Frey 2003 p.73; Madriz 2003 p.368). As some participants, lower socio-economic status women in particular (Madriz 2003 p.381), may be less likely to participate in discussions than others, it was important to establish rapport and trust (May 2001 p.130) between myself and members of the groups and let it be known that it is acceptable for them to disagree on issues. Therefore, the rules of the focus group were outlined at the beginning of each session.

Question one in the focus group asked the participants to describe the qualities of a good school. In question two, the factors which influenced parents were explored. The roles of parents, teachers, the State and the Catholic Church were discussed in question three. Questions four to seven were used to explore the home-school relationship and the involvement of parents in their children's schools. Participants were asked to outline the changes they had noticed in Irish education in question nine.

3.8.3 Pilot

There were two pilot interviews (Appendix 4.2 p.291) and one focus group (Appendix 4.5 p. 305). One interview was with my husband and the other was with the Special Needs assistant in the pilot school. Both, while being involved in their children's education, found the questions quite difficult to answer as neither of them had considered these issues before. The pilot focus group was also held in the pilot school. The principal arranged for the parents to be at the school an hour earlier than they normally would to collect their children. Seven parents/guardians turned up which is about half the parent population in that school. The pilot focus group was interesting in that the group, while very happy with the school and the education their children were receiving, appeared to have very little educational capital. They felt that the role of parents was to send their children to school and it was up to the school to educate them. They found many of the questions difficult and somewhat abstract.

These pilots highlighted the need to be more flexible during the interviews, more reflective about the participants' replies and not to be discouraged by people's inability or unwillingness to answer questions (Michael 2004 p.438). There was also a need to concentrate on the overall presentations as well as the answers to individual questions. The possible value in the attitudes, comments, gestures as well as the recorded answers needed to be recognised.

As the interviews were held after the questionnaires were returned, the existing questions were reviewed and altered some to include real-life examples that participants could relate to and perhaps answer more easily (Appendices 4.3 p.294; 4.6 p.308). I realised that I had to take into consideration that I had reflected on these issues more than most parents.

3.8.4 Data Collection

One of the principals, to make it easier for the school, suggested that parents would receive a letter requesting an interview. This seemed to be ideal in that the school would not be mediating which parents would be interviewed. A letter was drawn up explaining the purpose and format of the interview and distributed to all parents in first and third classes. There was a very low response rate. The reasons given by some of the parents were that they had already filled in the questionnaire for another child, they were apprehensive about doing an interview or that they were simply too busy doing other things.

There were four replies from the middle class girls' school - three mothers and a father. All four, when contacted, agreed to be interviewed. Two were interviewed in their homes, one in the school and one at work. While two parents from the middle class boys' school agreed to be interviewed, one was unavailable as she had just had a baby. The other, who was on the Parents Association, had agreed to represent them on the focus group. While no parents from the disadvantaged boys' school agreed to be interviewed, two parents from the disadvantaged girls' school agreed to be interviewed in the school. One never showed up and the other was a grandfather, who had reared his own family and was now guardian to his granddaughter. In order to ensure a balance between the views of middle class and disadvantaged parents, the HSCL teacher arranged for me to interview three other parents in the school.

Arranging focus groups was also difficult. The HSCL teacher for the disadvantaged schools arranged one focus group for me. The seven parents who took

part were, according to the principal, a mixed group. The principals in the middle class schools raised the issue with their Parents Associations. In the middle class boys' school, two parents volunteered to be interviewed. While the principal said that he'd try to get a few more, it did not work out. At the Parents Association meeting one of the parents agreed to phone me and arrange the time for the interview. Her child was in hospital and she forgot. When I turned up in the morning there was no one there. The principal phoned both parents and set a time for after school that day. In the middle class girls' school, the principal gave me the phone number of the chairperson of the Parents Association. However, she warned me that the parents had done tremendous work fundraising for the school and that they were a little burnt out. When I rang the chairperson she felt that people had had enough and we agreed not to go ahead with the focus group.

3.8.5 Data Analysis

The tape of each interview and focus group was transcribed. The content was analysed under the various themes. These included educational values and decision-making; influences and supports; roles of parents, teachers, State and Church; home-school relationships and communication; involvement in their children's learning and schools; and finally changes in education. These were integrated with the results from the questionnaires. A unique identification was given to each interview and focus group. This code described the research method [Interview (I) or Focus Group (FG)]; the order in which the data was collected [7 or the seventh person interviewed]; school status [Disadvantaged (D) or Middle Class (M)] and the participants' relationship to the child [Mother (M); Father (F); Grandfather (GF)].

As it was more authentic hearing from the interviewees themselves, sections of the interviews were extracted to illustrate their views. All names of people and places were taken out to preserve anonymity. An alternative wording was typed in square brackets in order to fill the gaps and ensure that the meaning of the extract was preserved. What I said is written in italics, while '.....' was inserted to indicate that part of their speech was left out. Individuals are not identified in the focus group, though a new separate line with 6pt spacing was used to show that someone different was talking.

> That school has a really good record now
> That young one now she was the lucky one
> A lot of her neighbours and friends now didn't get their children in (FG1D)

When analysing the data, it became obvious that some participants had difficulty understanding the questions and had not previously thought too deeply about the topic.

> *What or who influences your decisions around your child's education and schooling?*
> Really, can you break it down a bit? I do not really understand what you mean by that?
> (I2DM)

Even when asked about the role or job of the teacher, there was an acceptance that teachers teach but what that involved they were not too sure.

> *How would you describe the teacher's job in children's education?*
> God bless us, I do not know how they do it
> *Yeah, but what do you think they should be doing? What is their role? How is it different from yourself and your husband?*
> I know what you mean, yes, the role, you know what, the role, I do not know – give them the facts, you know. (3MM)

There were also gaps in knowledge particularly around the curriculum and school governance.

There also appeared to be a social class difference in the linguistic and cultural competence (Bourdieu 1977a p.494) of the interviewees with some of the disadvantaged parents reluctant to elaborate on or explain their views. Several questions were required to get the same amount of information middle class parents gave in one question. Middle class parents appeared to be more at ease in discussing their views with others and often considered several aspects of an issue when replying. These two discussions around the ethos of the school are good examples.

> *How important is the Catholic ethos of the school to you?*
> *Pause* It'd be important, you know what I mean but they do not go to Mass. They do not but if there is anything going on in the school they could participate in it
> *Would you send your child to a school that was non-Catholic?*
> No
> *Why not?*
> I just wouldn't *(Laughter)* (I7DM)

> *How important is the Catholic ethos of the school to you?*
> In the school – I wouldn't say it is - it is a Catholic school and we did consider sending [our child] to [the Church of Ireland school] and the main reason we didn't was from, it wasn't from the religion perspective. It was more from a facilities perspective and from a size perspective. It is a very good and a very happy little school but they do not have a huge amount of resources for the kids – in terms of facilities and so on. So having said that I would still -- but I still wouldn't have any problem sending any of ours to [the Church of Ireland school] from that perspective but they do look after the religious education of the kids. I consider that important and we are Catholics so [the local Catholic school] – well I am not sure how they do it but they do look after the first communion angle even within [the Church of Ireland school] so any Catholic kids in [the Church of Ireland school] are still looked after from the Holy Communion perspective. So I do think that it is important that they get religion education and as Catholics we would be keen that they would be brought along from that perspective but the fact that the school itself, whether the school itself is a Catholic school wouldn't be a very big factor. (I4MF)

It could also be that the middle class parents had volunteered of their own accord to do the interview. They had been contacted in advance by phone. Three of the disadvantaged parents, who had been recruited by the HSCL teacher, may have had very little advance notice. Therefore, they may have had less information and little time to reflect on the topic before the interview. Some were quite anxious about doing the interviews.

3.9 Documentary Analysis

Notes, newsletters and information booklets, which are designed to communicate with parents were analysed. These documents represent a reflection of reality and a method by which power is expressed and social order accomplished (May 2001 pp.182-3). The rationale behind the documentation, as well as its language and content was analysed (Creswell 2003 p.186). What is excluded may be as important as what is included.

3.9.1 Pilot

While doing the literature review, I collected the notes sent home by my daughter's school for that year. This amounted to fifty notes. They were then categorised and analysed. This data was given to the school in preparation for their Whole School Evaluation (WSE).

3.9.2 Data Collection

As it would be difficult and time consuming for a school to keep track of all the notes sent home during the school year, four of the case study schools were asked for their parent information booklets as well as a sample of the general notes sent home to parents during the year. However, as the principal of one of the boys' school was seriously ill and the other was involved in a Whole School Evaluation, no documentation was obtained from the boys' school. In the middle class girls' school, the principal gave copies of their monthly newsletters for the last two years as well as their Junior Infant information booklet and a general information booklet for parents. The disadvantaged girls' school gave me their information pack for Junior Infant parents, which was developed and used by all the schools in their HSCL cluster. I also received their own information booklet for Junior Infant parents, their pack for all parents, copies of their

newsletters for a year as well as a sample of notes and policies. These were analysed and compared with the notes, information booklets and policies sent home by my daughter's school.

3.9.3 Data Analysis

After analysing the content of fifty of the notes sent home by the local girls' school, preliminary categories were devised for interpreting the data. These included requests for parental involvement and finance, support for parents in their role as educators along with information about policies, events and closures/dates. The involvement of other agencies in the school was noted. Having analysed the content of the documentation from the three schools, it was difficult to compare them accurately as each of them had very different styles. Two schools sent out four newsletters a year, which was supplemented by formal notes from the principal. In the local girls' school, the Parents Association wrote the newsletter, while in the disadvantaged girls' school, it was the responsibility of the HSCL teacher. In the middle class girls' school, a monthly newsletter, which was more formal than the ones in the other schools, replaced the individual notes sent home by the school. However, notes were still sent out for particular issues, which concerned individual classes or were of immediate importance.

In the end, it was decided to compare the newsletters, the information books for Junior Infants and the general information packs for parents. There were a lot of similarities between the documentation and the activities engaged in by the schools. However, when analysing the infant parent information booklets, a possible bias was identified. As I had facilitated staff planning days on the development of these booklets in the two middle class schools, I would have had a certain amount of influence on the content. This is particularly evident in the infant school my daughters attended, where I would have insisted that certain items such as the complaints procedures should be included. I, therefore, decided to exclude the information books from the study.

While, all the newsletters informed parents of school closures/events, events, extra-curricular activities, fundraising and policies, some schools emphasised particular items more than others. The efforts of the children, parents and teachers were acknowledged in all schools and parents were encouraged to get involved in various activities. In the middle class schools, the choices offered were joining the Parents Association, helping out with fundraising and some school activities. In the disadvantaged girls' school, parental participation in the HSCL classes, learning

programmes for children and other school activities was promoted. Parental input in to decision-making or governance was rarely mentioned. All of the newsletters concentrated on local school-related issues. There was no mention of national issues, which impact on parents and education. The Parents Associations in the middle class schools were affiliated to the NPCP and so their parents should also receive the NPCP newsletter. This contains information about national issues.

Eventually, after some consideration and another attempt to get documentation from the boys' schools, the analysis of the documentation from four of the case study schools was excluded. Each time a piece of documentation is referred to, a code was written beside it. It consisted of the research method [SD], the school [Disadvantaged Girls (DG); Middle Class Girls (MG); Local School (LS)] followed by the year. The analysis of the notes sent home by the local girls' school was included to illustrate the frequency and content of correspondence from school to home.

3.10 Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the impact of the national policy of parental involvement in their children's education and schooling. The development of the research methodology is outlined in this chapter. The case study method was chosen as it allowed me to use of a variety of approaches (Gray 2004), both qualitative and quantitative.

Five single sex Catholic primary schools in north Dublin, which were part of my database as an SDPS facilitator, were chosen to be part of the case study. Three of the schools were in middle class areas. The other two were designated as DEIS Band 1 Urban (DES 2005d p.78) and receive additional resources from the DES, which include the services of a HSCL teacher. Questionnaires, interviews and focus groups were used to explore the involvement of the parents in four of these schools in their children's education. Participant observation was used in the fifth school. Specific observations of various aspects of my own involvement with my children's education and school were used to support and further develop the data from the other schools. Documentary analysis was used to investigate how these schools communicated with parents. The findings are reported in the following chapters. As explained in this chapter, each participant was given a unique code to illustrate the research method used to obtain the information along with their social status and gender.

Realising that this research had limitations, I tried to be as reflexive as possible at each stage of the study (Coffey 1999 p. 126; Darlington and Scott 2002 p. 18). This meant frequently checking the research questions and the analysis of the data with the literature review and the findings from the various research methods.

Chapter Four Research Findings: Home Education

4.1 Introduction

The findings from the various research methodologies are presented in the next two chapters. As the quantitative data from the questionnaires and qualitative data from the interviews, focus groups and field diaries are used to support and inform each other (Miles and Huberman 1994 p.310; Kane and O'Reilly-De Brún 2001 p.335), the findings are integrated under themes relevant to the research questions, the evaluation criteria and the literature review. As outlined in Chapter Three, a unique code was given to each respondent to ensure that the contributions from particular individuals can be recognised. In addition, the abbreviation of the research methodology used to obtain this particular information is written beside the data and/or quote.

Much of a child's learning takes place outside the school (Bourdieu 1974; Macbeth and Ravn 1994) and parents who may be 'missing' (Edwards and Alldred 2000 p.452) from the school's perspective may be very active in the home setting. This chapter focuses on the role of parents as 'the primary educators' (Ireland 1937) of their children. As the values, norms and identities of the respondents influence their parenting practices, the following section deals with the background information of the respondents in this research. It describes how the various variables, like gender, age, family status, education and employment levels, are both represented and connected with each other in this research. The particular variables, which are most influential on parental practices, are highlighted in all sections of this and subsequent chapters. Section three examines the respondents' perception of their roles and responsibilities in rearing and educating their children. This is followed by the decision-making processes, which the respondents used to guide their children through the education process and to choose both primary and secondary schools for their children. Section five describes the support and network systems, which help parents to educate and rear their children, while the section six looks at parental involvement in the home curriculum. The final section describes how parents support the school at home.

4.2 Background Information

This research was a case study based on five single sex Catholic schools within a three mile radius in North Dublin. Two of the schools, a boys' and a girls', were

designated as DEIS Band 1 Urban by the Department of Education and Science (DES), which meant that they were two of the 150 Irish primary schools with the highest concentration of disadvantaged pupils (DES 2005d p. 78). They were on the one campus and shared a Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator. A large number of their parents were involved with children's learning programmes and adult education classes. While having no official Parents Association, they had a parents' fundraising committee. The other two, a boys' and a girls', were in a nearby middle class area. They were about a half a mile apart in the same parish. Both had very active Parents Associations. Some of their children may have been from disadvantaged areas as there is a trend for parents from disadvantaged areas to send their children to nearby middle class schools. The principal of the girls' school suggested that her school had less of these children than the boys' school.

The fifth school, which is the local school that my children attended, was an all-girls senior school in a middle class area. It had a very active Parents Association, which was affiliated to the National Parents Council-Primary (NPCP). Like the other middle class schools some of its children came from disadvantaged areas. This school was in the same second level catchment area as the other four schools.

This section examines the profile of the schools as well as the respondents to the questionnaire, interviews and focus groups. It investigates the sample population along with the data on variables such as gender, age, citizenship, religion, employment, education levels of the respondents and their children, along with family type and size. The influence of these variables on the profiles of the respondents is also explored.

4.2.1 The researcher as a participant observer

Initially when I started this research, my theories on parental involvement in their children's education were implicit. As the literature review progressed the multidimensional nature of the policy of parental involvement became apparent. As an integral part of the State's family policy, it was not only linked to many other national policies, but to democracy, globalisation and the substance of the welfare state itself. The relationship between parents, society, schools, the Church and the State is discussed almost daily in the media. The tensions between the traditional patriarchal familism policy paradigm and the more recent paradigm of egalitarian individualism (Fahey 1998) are apparent as the country tries to come to terms with and plan for changes in society. The changing roles of the bishops and the laity were central to discussions on the future

of the Catholic Church in Ireland, not just in education, but also in the community. As a practising Catholic, these issues were important concerns in my life.

At a local and personal level, I became aware of the 'cultural capital' available, not only to me as an educated professional parent, but to other parents. It was interesting to observe how parents networked to get information on parenting strategies, their children's developmental and educational needs along with information on their schools and individual teachers. They used this information along with their cultural and economic capital to influence the schools' agendas and to supplement the education being provided by the school. I also became aware of how my children used my 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) to their advantage in their interactions with their teachers. The gender aspect of parenting was obvious, not only in my relationship with my husband, but also in the relationships of other couples. There seems to be a continuous negotiation of parenting responsibilities and individual interests, with couples weighing up their choices in terms of their commitments to their work, partners and children. I also became more aware of my parenting style and skills, the tactics I used to 'display responsibility' (Silverman 2004 p.66) as a parent and the often subtle ways I supported my children's education and school. These issues influenced my values, which are embedded in the research process and theories (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994 p.122; Silverman 2004 p.64).

4.2.2 Questionnaires

Two hundred and sixty four questionnaires were returned from four of the schools (Table 1.5 p.79). The majority of respondents described themselves as Irish (93% N=230) citizens. The remaining 7% (N=18) were equally divided between citizens from the European Union (EU) (excluding Ireland) and non-EU countries. All four schools were Catholic schools under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin and the majority of respondents described themselves as Catholics (94% N=240). The remainder either had no religion (2% N=6) or belonged to other Christian religions (3% N=8) or to a non-Christian religion (1% N=2).

More questionnaires were returned from the middle class schools (Table 1.5 p.79). As outlined in Chapter Three, lower pupil-teacher ratios, parental literacy and poorer attendance levels in the disadvantaged schools may have accounted for the variations in the returns. As can be seen from Table 1.6, respondents from the middle

class and disadvantaged schools differed from each other on variables such as gender, family status and employment and education levels.

Table 1.6
Differences between respondents from middle class and disadvantaged schools

Variable	Middle class Schools		Disadvantaged Schools		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Fathers	21	**88**	3	**13**	24	**101***
Third level qualifications	50	**82**	11	**18**	61	**100**
Two-parent families	132	**75**	45	**25**	177	**100**
Paid employment (Both full and part-time)	115	**74**	40	**26**	155	**100**
Total number of respondents across school type	**168**	**64**	**96**	**36**	**264**	**100**

* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Gender had a major influence on who returned the questionnaires. Most were completed by mothers (85% N=224). Only 9% (N=24) were completed by fathers. They tended to be over forty (63% N= 15) and have children in the senior classes of the middle class schools (71% N=17). In fact, 54% (N=13) were from the middle class boys' school. They were also more likely to be in two-parent families (92% N=22) and in full-time paid employment (78% N=18). The remaining 6% (N=15) of respondents were either guardians (3% N=8) or couples (3% N=7). As there were very few responses from guardians or couples, these variables will not be analysed and the term parent will be used to describe the respondents to the questionnaires.

Fifty-two percent (N=136) of respondents were from the boys' schools and 49% (N=128) were from the girls' schools. While the number of questionnaires returned by parents in the senior (N=132) and junior classes (N=132) was exactly the same, there were differences between classes. Twenty-eight percent (N=75) of the respondents had children in sixth class, 22% (N=57) had children in fourth, 31% (N=82) had children in second and finally 19% (N=50) had children in senior infants. Lower class sizes accounted for the low number of returns in senior infants, while the disadvantaged boys' school had two second classes. As can be seen from Table1.7, the profile of the respondents who had children in junior and senior classes differed. Respondents with children in junior classes tended to be younger and have pre-school children. They were less likely to have older children who had either left school and/or were attending secondary school. More fathers replied from the senior classes. Children's stage of development also seemed to impact on employment levels.

Table 1.7
Differences between respondents who had children in the senior and junior classes

Variable	Senior Classes		Junior Classes		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Fathers	18	**75**	6	**25**	24	**100**
Older children who have left school	18	**69**	8	**31**	26	**100**
Full-time paid employment	40	**66**	21	**34**	61	**100**
Children attending second level schools	56	**65**	30	**35**	86	**100**
Pre-school children	20	**28**	51	**72**	71	**100**
Aged under thirty	11	**26**	31	**74**	42	**100**
Total number of respondents across class levels	**132**	**50**	**132**	**50**	**264**	**100**

Family size varied from one to six children. Fifteen percent of respondents (N=38) had only one child, 33% (N=85) had two children, 30% (N=78) had three children and 22% (N=58) had between four and six children. No family had over six children. While middle class respondents tended to have smaller families, the percentage of respondents in one-child families was similar in the middle class and disadvantaged schools. As can be seen from Table1.8, parents with smaller families tended to be younger.

Table 1.8
The link between the age of the respondent and family size

Variable	Aged under thirty		Aged between thirty and thirty-nine		Aged forty and over		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
One child	19	**50**	12	**32**	7	**18**	38	**100**
Two children	14	**17**	38	**45**	33	**39**	85	**101***
Three children	4	**5**	37	**48**	36	**47**	77	**100**
Four or more children	4	**7**	24	**42**	29	**51**	57	**100**
Total	41	**16**	111	**43**	105	**41**	257	**100**

X^2=.000, p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Parents from the disadvantaged schools also tended to be younger with only a quarter of them over forty (27% N=26). In contrast, nearly half (47% N=79) of the respondents from middle class schools were over forty.

While 28% (N=71) of respondents had children under the school-going age, 34% (N=86) had children attending secondary school. Ten percent (N=26) of respondents had children who had left school. Of these, two were under sixteen and had left school, four were unemployed, nine were in third level education and nineteen were working. Seven of the nine who said that they had children who were attending third level education were from the middle class schools. In addition, the two respondents who had children under sixteen years of age who were not attending school were from the disadvantaged schools as were three of the four respondents whose children who were unemployed. Apart from the respondents with children in second level, these variables are not analysed as the numbers involved are too small.

The family status, employment and education levels of the respondents were also important variables. Most (71% N=177) were in two-parent families, with little over a quarter (30% N=74) in one-parent families. While there was an equal number of respondents in either part-time (38% N=94) or not in (38% N=94) paid employment, only 25% (N=61) were in full-time paid employment. Most respondents (67% N=169) had a second level education. While 24% (N=61) had gone to third level, 9% (N=22) had attended only primary school. As stated previously, the schools the respondents' children attended and these variables were linked (Table 1.6 p.93).

4.2.3 Interviews

I interviewed eight parents, four from the disadvantaged schools and four from the girls' middle class schools. While the participants from the disadvantaged area had children in various classes within the school, all the middle class interviewees had a child in first class in the girls' school. There were four mothers, a father (I4MF) and a grandparent (I1DGF). All except one (I5MM) was Irish. She was English and had attended Catholic schools in England. Two of the mothers (I5MM; I6MM) had children with special needs, who were attending learning support.

All of the middle class interviewees were in two-parent families with at least one parent in paid employment. In the case of the two families, where only one parent worked, one had a wife (I4MF) on career break because the children were so small. The other (I6MM) was heavily involved in a children's charity along with supporting her

husband's business. All had some form of third level qualification and some (I3MM; 15MM) told me that they were still involved in further education. Most had two or three children. None of their children were in second level education yet. They were all between thirty-five and forty-five years of age. None were members of the Parents Association. Of these parents, only one was committed to a Catholic education for their children (I5MM).

Three mothers and a grandfather were interviewed in the disadvantaged schools. Two of the mothers were aged between thirty and thirty-nine, while one of them was in her twenties. The grandfather was the guardian of the child. His eldest child was twenty-nine and he looked as if he was in his forties. Two (I1DGF; I2DM) worked outside the home. The three mothers were not living with the children's fathers, though in two cases (I2DM; I7DM) the fathers were still involved with the children. The third case (I8DM) had a partner who was very involved in rearing the children. These women were very active in the school and they were all doing various courses through the HSCL scheme. Two were committed to a Catholic education for their children (I2DM; I7DM).

4.2.4 Focus Group

For the focus group in the disadvantaged schools, I interviewed seven women. Two were very quiet and said little. According to the principal they represented most parents in the school. Most had done courses through the HSCL scheme and helped out with various activities in the school. One woman, the HSCL teacher told me, was very shy. She was one of her success stories as she had got her to do a course after seven years of persuasion. Another was very talkative and acted almost like the spokeswoman for the group. One of her children had ADHD. Having worked in a crèche for several years, she compared the accountability there to the accountability in schools.

In the middle class schools, the focus group consisted of two parents, who were members of the Parents Association in the boys' school. They were both 'stay-at-home' mothers and were heavily involved in both their children's education and the school.

4.2.4 Summary

The research population reflect the dominant status group in Irish Society. The majority of respondents were Irish Catholics. While both social classes were equally represented in the qualitative data, more questionnaires were returned from the middle

class schools. While respondents were equally divided on the age and gender of their children, the majority who participated were mothers.

The profiles of the respondents differed depending on the status of their school and the size of their family. The respondents from the middle class schools tended to be older, living in two-parent families and have third level qualifications. They were also more likely to be employed either full-time or part-time. Younger respondents were more likely to have only one child. The respondents who were interviewed reflected these variables.

4.3 Parental Roles and Responsibilities

Parents are described as the primary educators of their child in the Irish Constitution (Ireland 1937). In this section, the perceptions of respondents as to the roles and responsibilities of parents in their children's education are explored. Traditionally, gender defined the parents' role. Fathers were responsible for providing financial security and mothers were responsible for child rearing (Fahey 1998). However, these distinctions have blurred in recent times.

4.3.1 Roles and Responsibilities of Parents

All the parents who were interviewed saw their role as nurturing, supporting and encouraging their children. They felt that parents had a crucial role to play in the education of their children.

> You're the nurturer and if you haven't nurtured your child, the child isn't going to do anything really. No matter what they're learning in school if they are not being nurtured and cared for and brought on at home, it just isn't going to click with them, nothing is going to work (FG2M)

Interviewees also felt that it was important to monitor their children's development, behaviour and social networks both at home and at school.

> Well, not to be funny but to me it is to keep on top of everything like whether it is school or outside school, it is to know where they are, what they are doing, who their friends are, who their friends families are (I8DM)

The majority of the respondents to the questionnaire agreed that parents were the most important teachers of their children (88% N=229) and should always put their children's needs before their own (78% N=200). It is interesting that the parents in the disadvantaged boys' school had the strongest views on this (Table 1.9).

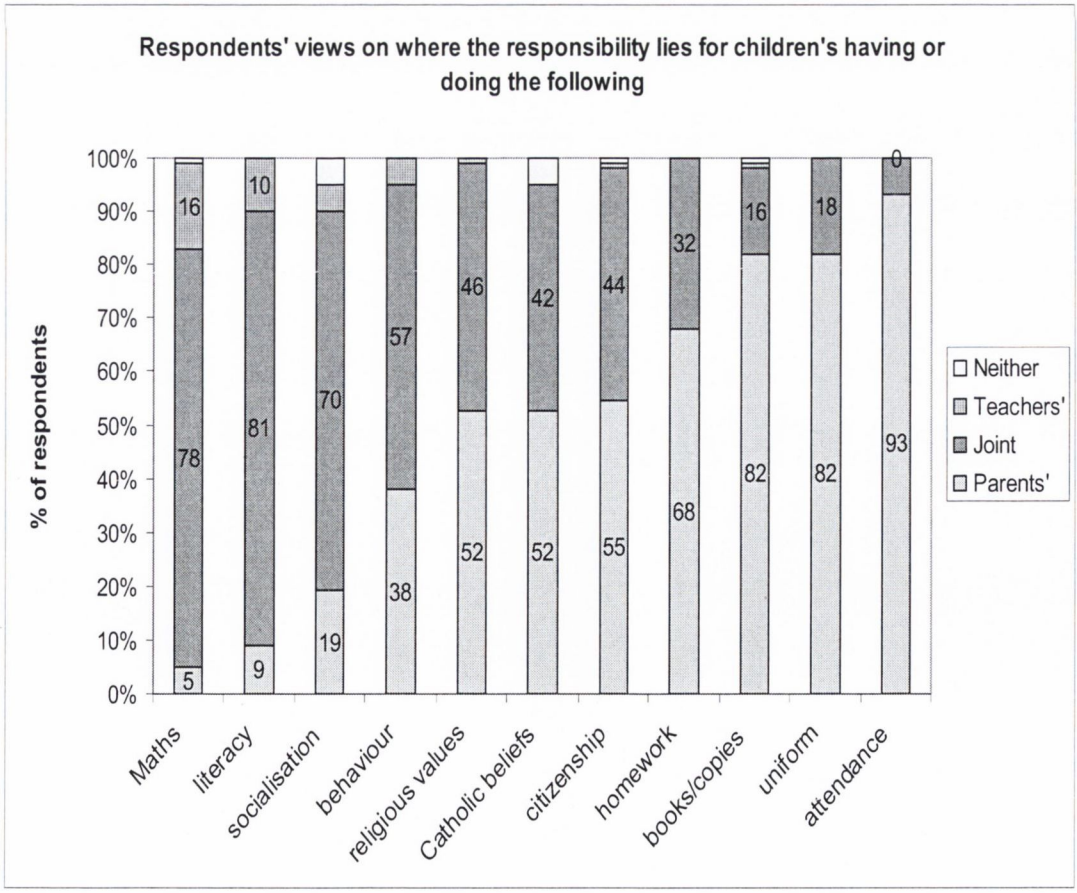
Table 1.9
Respondents' perceptions on whether parents are the most important teachers of their children

Variable	Strongly Agree		Agree		Did not agree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Disadvantaged boys' school	40	**71**	9	**16**	7	**13**	56	100
Disadvantaged girls' school	21	**55**	14	**37**	3	**8**	38	100
Middle class boys' school	33	**42**	31	**40**	14	**18**	78	100
Middle class girls' school	41	**47**	40	**46**	7	**8**	88	101*
Total	135	**52**	94	**36**	31	**12**	260	100

X^2=.005 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

While participants acknowledged the valuable work of teachers, very few felt that teachers had sole responsibility for any area of children's learning (Figure 1.1). A small minority thought that teachers were responsible for Maths (16% N=42), literacy (10% N=27), socialisation (5% N=14) and behaviour (5% N=14).

Figure 1.1



Parent-teacher co-operation was seen as crucial in the development of children's socialisation, Maths and literacy skills. However, getting the children to school and ensuring that they had their books, pencils, copies and uniform was seen as the sole responsibility of parents. One mother described her role, "My role is to send them here to school every day and to get them the best education that they can get. Get them to school on time" (I7DM). While a majority of respondents (68% N=178) took sole responsibility for homework, 32% (N=83) saw it as a joint responsibility.

There was less agreement in the area of values and behaviour. While a majority (57% N=146) felt that children behaving well in school was a joint responsibility, a sizeable minority (38% N=98) saw it as being the sole responsibility of the parent and agreed with the interviewee who said, "If the child is bold in school that is my fault - I'm wrong and the teacher is quite entitled to bring me up" (I1DGF). Similarly, respondents were divided between those who felt that parents were responsible for their children having religious values (52% N=146), being good citizens and good Catholics and those who perceived these tasks as the joint responsibility of both teachers and parents.

Respondents from the disadvantaged schools appeared to feel more responsibility for their children's homework and citizenship. 79% (N=74) felt that parents were responsible for their children's homework as compared with 62% (N=104) from the middle class schools. Similarly, 68% (N=63) of the parents in the disadvantaged schools felt that parents were responsible for their children being good citizens as compared to 49% (N=79) of middle class parents.

Lone-parents also appeared to assume more responsibility for their children than those in two-parent families. Seventy-seven percent (N=57) of parents in one-parent families felt that parents were responsible for homework in comparison with 64% (N=111) of those in two-parent families. Likewise 69% (N=50) of those in one parent-families felt that parents were responsible for children being good citizens as opposed to 51% (N=86) of those in two-parent families.

The education levels of the respondents influenced their perceptions on who had responsibility for children's education. The higher the respondents' level of education the more they perceived education as a joint responsibility between home and school (Table1.10).

Table 1.10
Influence of the respondents' education level on their perceptions that education is the joint responsibility of both parents and teachers

Variable	Primary School		Second Level		Third Level		Total who perceived that these areas were a joint responsibility	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Maths*	13	**65**	129	**77**	50	**82**	192	**77**
Reading and writing	9	**45**	133	**80**	56	**92**	198	**80**
Mixing well	8	**40**	119	**71**	46	**75**	173	**70**
Good citizens*	7	**35**	65	**39**	32	**54**	104	**43**
Religious values*	5	**24**	72	**45**	33	**54**	110	**45**
Good Catholics	4	**22**	68	**43**	30	**55**	44	**102**
Homework*	4	**19**	51	**31**	24	**39**	79	**32**
Total number of respondents across education levels	**22**	**8**	**167**	**67**	**61**	**23**	**252**	**100**

* Not significant p<.05

Respondents with lower educational qualifications were also more likely to consider the teacher responsible for their children's literacy, numeracy and socialisation skills (Table 1.11).

Table 1.11
Influence of the respondents' education level on their perceptions that literacy, numeracy and socialisation was the responsibility of the teacher

Variable	Primary School		Second Level		Third Level		Total who perceived these areas were the responsibility of the teacher	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	% *
Reading and writing	7	**35**	17	**10**	3	**5**	27	**11**
Mixing well	5	**25**	8	**5**	0	**0**	13	**5**
Maths*	6	**30**	24	**14**	10	**16**	40	**16**
Total number of respondents within education levels	**22**	**8**	**167**	**67**	**61**	**23**	**252**	**100**

* Not significant p<.05

4.3.2 Mothers

Social class influenced the views of the respondents on the role of the mother. In the interviews, disadvantaged parents described the mother's role mainly in relation to their children's behaviour.

> God, they do everything for them. It is how you teach them to look after themselves and how to respect other people and respect themselves, their manners and, you know everything. (I2DM)

Middle class parents talked about the work involved with being a mother. They explained how mothers supported and guided their children and introduced them to positive new experiences.

> By nature, they have the ability to be doing so many different things at the one time - they are able to listen to their children, they are able to do their homework and at the same time they have the shopping done and the meal planned and dinner ready and bag packed for the next day. (I6MM)

> I think try to expose them to as many new positive influences as possible, you know, to go places, take them to the theatre, anything that you think will be new and novel, that they'd learn from, it is a positive thing and a learning experience. (I5MM)

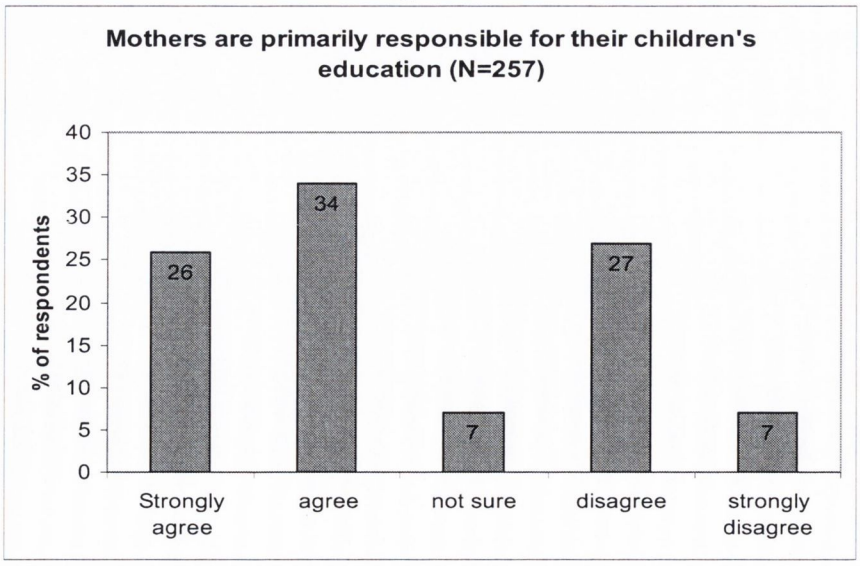
Some mentioned the inherent conflict and demands of being a mother in today's world.

> Tired, *laughter,* tired with two jobs and two kids,
> *You'd be knackered*
> Yeah, knackered after all that and then I've got my course on a Friday morning as well, I'm wacked. Ah it a good job though, you get the rewards at the end. (I2DM)

> In my case I had no option but to stop working ..... All of the things that you'd think were a great loss to you, your career and everything ..... but ..... when you come to terms with being a stay-at-home mum for whatever reason and come to terms, you know, with being treated like only a mere 'mother' or whatever, ... it is good .... to be at home with the children and .... when children get older it is nearly more important for parents to be around. (I6MM)

It was interesting how many of the respondents felt that mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2



Views varied a great deal among participants. Only a quarter of fathers (26% N=6) as compared to almost two-thirds of mothers (64% N=139) agreed that mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education. As can be seen from Table 1.12, respondents from one-parent family felt strongly that mothers were primarily responsible for the education of their children.

Table 1.12
Differences between the view of respondents from one-parent and two-parent families on whether mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education

Variable	Strongly Agree		Agree		Did not agree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Two-parent families	31	**18**	66	**38**	76	**44**	173	**100**
One-parent families	32	**44**	19	**26**	21	**29**	72	**99***
Total	63	**26**	85	**35**	97	**40**	245	**101***

X^2=.000 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Parents with children in the disadvantaged schools were also more likely to consider the mother responsible for their children's education. Almost three-quarters (73% N=69) agreed with this statement as compared with half (52% N=84) of middle class parents. Naturally enough employment levels had an impact on the perceptions of parents. Those in full-time paid employment were less likely to feel that mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education (Table 1.13). Only three of these were in one-parent families and they did not agree that mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education.

Table 1.13
Influence of employment levels on respondents' views on whether mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education

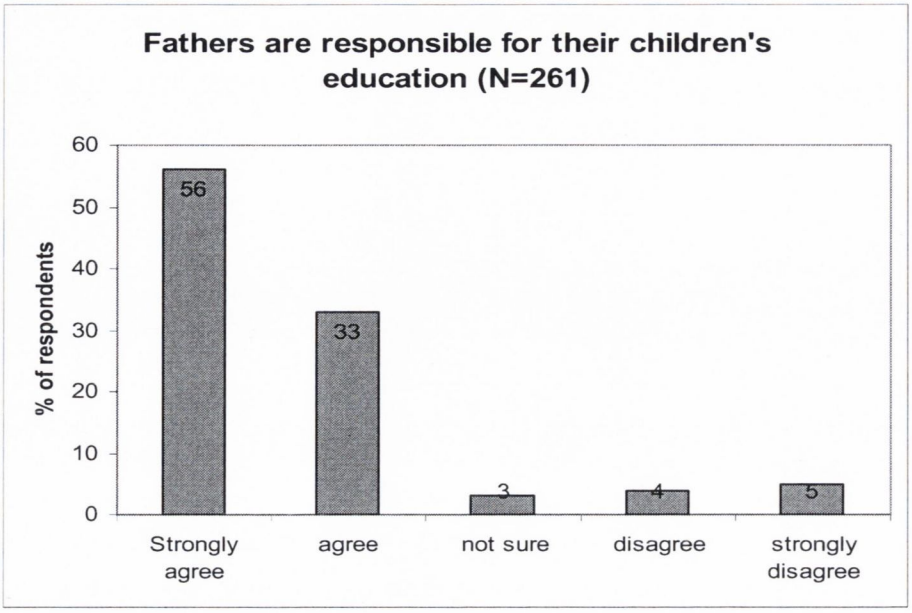
Variable	Strongly Agree		Agree		Did not agree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Employed full-time	5	**9**	20	**34**	34	**58**	59	**101***
Employed part-time	24	**26**	30	**33**	38	**41**	92	**100**
Not in paid employment	31	**34**	34	**37**	27	**29**	92	**100**
Total	60	**25**	84	**35**	99	**41**	243	**101***

X^2=.002 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

4.3.3 Fathers

Most respondents to the questionnaire agreed that fathers were responsible for their children's education (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3



There were only a few differences between the respondents. For obvious reasons, those in one-parent families were less likely to agree with this statement. Only 80% (N=59) agreed that fathers were responsible for their children's education as compared to 93% (N=161) of those in two-parent families. It is interesting that respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to agree that fathers were responsible for their children's education (Table 1.14).

Table 1.14
The impact of the respondents' education levels on their views on whether fathers are responsible for their children's education

Variable	Strongly Agree		Agree		Did not agree		Totals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary level qualification	9	**43**	4	**19**	8	**38**	21	**100**
Second level qualification	92	**55**	58	**35**	17	**10**	167	**100**
Third level qualification	38	**62**	20	**33**	3	**5**	61	**100**
Total	139	**56**	82	**33**	28	**11**	249	**100**

X^2=.001 p<.05

Most of those who were interviewed, felt that there was no difference between the mother's and father's role. The two men were very definite about this.

> What we do at the minute as two guardians and grandparents, we both work, she cooks, I clean up, I wash, I iron, anything, she does the same. I think a mother's role right now is the same as a father's..... the mother is the one who bears the child and all that but once the child is out and running about a parent is a parent - in any form, a foster parent, a real parent. I think it is that association you have with the child in the early years that bonds with it, you know. (I1DGF)

> I think no different to the mother's job. I would see it more as a question of the parents' job rather than the father's job in terms of, at one stage both myself and my wife worked - my wife is on a career break - so at various times I would have taken a day's leave to look after the kids. I would have no issues in terms of looking after them. My wife was away for ten days over Easter so I looked after them and in terms of the kids and all the household stuff, my wife would be doing more because she is at home .... I wouldn't see any issue in terms of or distinction between what a father does and what a mother does. (I4MF)

The mothers, however, suggested that it depended on the personality of the father and the circumstances of the family. While fathers could be very supportive and interested in their children, the final decisions and a lot of the work was often left to mothers. This was particularly noticeably in one-parent families.

> *What, do you feel, is the father's job in child rearing and education?*
> Basically the same as mine but my role I probably have that bit more say.
> *Why would you have more say?*
> O, I'm on my own. I do not have a partner. Anything I decide - I make all the decisions.
> *Do they see their Dad?*
> Yeah, well the littlest one does, the other two do not and he's great like that, he'd come over if there are meetings or anything, he'd come over for the parent-teacher meeting and all that and if there are any problems he'd go up to the school, but at the end of the day the decision would be left to me. (I7DM)

Others suggested that roles were worked out to meet the needs of the family and that fathers had a different, but just as important, role as mothers. Some perceived that fathers were important role models. One mother said that children 'knocked great fun' (I6MM) out of doing physical activities such as sports with their fathers. They could also confide in their father, or in this case the male partner, in a way that they could not confide in their mother.

> Now we have a system in our house where they do not talk to me they talk to him, you know and then like for a long time they'd say to him, 'Do not tell me ma'. He'd say 'right ok', now he did tell me but I wouldn't act on it. He'd deal with it so we had that kind of thing going, you know, so it was handy enough that way. (I8DM)

Some suggested that 'old fashioned' views and women's attitudes prevent fathers from taking more of a role in their children's education and lives.

> I think we stigmafy (sic) fathers, maybe it is old fashioned views that they do not commit. It might be that we do not let them, it is not their fault. It is our fault that they do not come in to it. (FG1D)

'Stay-at-home' mums, through networking, build up their knowledge of the education system. This gives them an advantage over fathers when making educational decisions.

> If you have a stay-at-home mum, whose been at home for maybe five, six, seven years prior to the child starting school, obviously she's going to have been networking and she is going to know things that the Dad is not going to know: 'Who so and so is? What school? Who? What happened? There's drugs where?' This is what you get. (FG2M)

For a lot of parents it was 'the practicalities of the whole thing' (I5MM) with mothers' employment schedules often allowing them spend more time with the children. Lacking

confidence in their own abilities, fathers may rely on the expertise of the mother and perceive their role as one of supporting her or 'backing her up'.

> Well I definitely think that the problem is that my husband is not academic. He will always say 'What do you think?' but he's actually very good with them. He will sit with them, do the reading, but sometimes I think it is more me that tends to do it but I am here more as well. I only work three days a week and I think that has something to do with it. (I3MM)

4.3.4 Summary

Parents saw their role as helping, supporting and encouraging their children. While they acknowledged the contribution of teachers, they considered themselves responsible for their children's education. Respondents from the disadvantaged schools and those with low levels of education were more likely to feel that parents were responsible for their children's education.

While most felt that there was no difference between the mother's and father's role, a majority agreed that mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education. Despite the fact that fathers could be very supportive and interested in their children, female participants, particularly those in the disadvantaged schools, felt that the vast majority of the work involved in supporting children's education was left to mothers (Reay 1998 p.60).

4.4 Educational Choices

This section looks at the attitudes of the participants in this research towards their children's education. It examines their hopes and fears for their children along with the strategies they use to ensure their educational future. Participants in this research had a variety of primary and secondary schools to which they could choose to send their children. Their access to and use of information about these schools along with the factors which influenced their decision-making processes are explored. As Bourdieu (1974 p.33) suggested that parental attitudes towards school are influenced by social class, the differences between the middle class and disadvantaged parents are outlined.

4.4.1 Attitudes and Motivation:

Interviewees were asked what their hopes and fears for their children were. The middle class parents wanted their children to be happy, confident, well-rounded individuals who would go on to third level. One (I3MM) was studying herself for a nursing degree and hoped that her daughter would follow her example:

> I feel that it is the norm because she sees me going to college, she sees me studying and it is not normal to see a Mammy doing that .... I have to laugh. Sometimes you feel like the big sister because I am talking about being a student in college and doing exams – O my God– and she's only seven. (I3MM)

The disadvantaged parents hoped that their children would stay on at school and get a good job. When asked how long they wanted their children to stay on in education, they said, "Hopefully on to college" (I7DM; I8DM). Their fears for their children were very specific and centred on their immediate environment or 'street'. Their greatest fear was that their children would meet up the wrong crowd who "are in trouble with the police or drugs or drink." (I8MM).

In contrast, many of the middle class parents had vague fears for their children.

> Ah, sure I wouldn't say we have any – what are our fears? Ahem that they are not happy. That they would get into danger in some way or other – that they have accidents. Ahem, ahem, but I wouldn't say – it is not something that we - at the moment. Our focus is on keeping them safe. We try not to worry about global warming or nuclear fall out or what ever. I wouldn't say that there are any dominating fears, you know anything in particular. (I4MF)

They also had fears that their children would not be academically able for school or have a teacher that would let them down. They were very aware of the points systems and tried not to let it duly influence their decisions.

> I do not want my children to be under appalling pressure to get the right amount of points and it is amazing because [the 11 year old] is extra-ordinarily bright, ... and she is already determined what she wants to be and she had already found out and talked to baby minders and older cousins – she knows exactly currently how many points she needs to get – she feels she is not very good at Irish and she asked me recently to organised private classes because she is so determined. (I6MM)

There was also the worry that as teenagers their children would do something that would limit their educational opportunities.

> You never know, you know children's personalities come in to it. When she is sixteen she might be a total bloody nightmare and rebel, some one you can't control. I would hope that from being very young up that she'd have that idea [of going to college]. (I3MM)

When parents were asked what they were doing to make their hopes come through, the middle class parents talked about the importance of proving a happy stable environment, spending time with their children doing different activities and the different methods they used to influence their children. Disadvantaged parents, on the other hand, had a variety of strategies to ensure that their hopes came true. These included bringing their children up properly, keeping an eye on them, having a strict routine especially around homework and helping out in the school. Despite these strategies, there was also the feeling that how their children turned out was out of their control.

> Well I can't really stop them. The only thing I can do is I tell the kids the rights and wrongs and teach them everything there is that I can teach them At the end of the day I have to say to my young fella (sic), you have the information, what you do with it now is your call. It will be down to him. (I8DM)

4.4.2 Choosing schools

Parents in this study had a good selection of primary and secondary schools to which they could send their children. There was a range of schools in the area including various Catholic schools, Gaelscoileanna, Church of Ireland and Educate Together schools. For two of the middle class parents (I3MM; I6MM) the school their children were attending was not their first preference. One (I3MM) had tried to enrol her child in the Gaelscoil but there were no places. The other (I6MM) had originally sent her children to a small inner city Church of Ireland school but moved them because the children could not socialise.

> There were lots of children coming from, I suppose, disadvantaged areas certainly and a lot of the children there were from one-parent families, which sort of really wasn't a problem but culturally, there was such a huge cultural difference between totally inner city children and I suppose children from a middle class background and what made me move in the end was that the children literally couldn't socialise..... some of the children were so rough and though a few of them were individually lovely children, their parents were – *short laugh* – I mean I would be there at the school like a duck out of water. (I6MM)

Likewise, one of the disadvantaged parents (I7DM) had originally sent her children to a Gaelscoil but removed them because 'it did not work out' and she felt that her children's English had suffered. Another of the disadvantaged parents (I8DM), though still involved with school, had moved her child from the disadvantaged school to a more middle class school because she felt that these schools had a better support system.

All the parents were very much aware of the different secondary schools in the area and the reputations. All of the middle class parents had their children's names down in at least one secondary school. These were mainly local schools though two did have their names down for a city centre fee-paying school.

> Yeah. I put her down when she was in Senior Infants and was told that 'Oh, you left it a bit late'. I nearly died. I thought, 'O my God' and they said 'She'll probably get in – not to worry'. Now I did go, it was from other parents I found out who was putting them in, that's where most of the kids were going - word of mouth in the school yard (I3MM)

In contrast, only one of the disadvantaged parents (I1DGF) was even considering sending their children to the local secondary school. He felt that his granddaughter had had a good education so far and would continue on to the local secondary school with her friends. He had not sent his own children to the local schools but felt in retrospect that they were better resourced because they were in disadvantaged areas. The others were reluctant to send their children to the local school because they felt that they would

meet 'nicer kids' (I2DM) in the middle class schools. They also thought that behaviour problems in the local schools would either interfere with their children's education or lead them astray.

> I do not know about the [local secondary school] because I think the [local secondary school] has changed..... They get an awful lot of time off. I suppose there is trouble in every school, beatings and that so I will just have to wait and see, ...
>
> There's stabbings over there
>
> .....the staff are under unbelievable pressure. Now I am not putting it all down to the school because I am not going to badmouth the school, but they do not have the time for individual students and there is an awful lot of students over there as well. (FG1D)

However, none of them, unlike the middle class parents, stated that they had put their children's names down in the secondary schools of their choice. One woman suggested, ".... if you are sending them somewhere, find out a month in advance about the school" (FG1D). The reason may have been as one person suggested in the focus group:

> If I had of lived in a different area I would have been more aware of looking in to schools and had a bit more money, I'd be more aware of looking in to primary schools and going through the system and saying that has a good record for this and .... But .... when you are living here and unemployed when the kids started, the nearest school or whatever was there you took it. While if I had to do it all again, (FG1D)

There was no awareness that their choice of secondary school was limited if their children's names were not on the waiting list. Many disadvantaged parents had a fatalistic attitude believing that it did not really matter which school you send your children to. At the end of the day if the children were not willing to learn the school could do little about it.

> There is not much difference between schools. If a child is not going to learn it doesn't matter what school they go to, you know what I mean (FG1D)

4.4.3 Factors which influenced their choice of school

While many factors influenced their choice of school, the 'good name' and academic reputation of the school was a primary consideration. While respondents were influenced by the reputation of the school, its location to either their home or child care was also important. Many felt that the "the logistics of getting them there" (I5MM) was also important.

> The only thing I suppose is maybe if it was your parish school and it was a good school I'd say that an awful lot of the children would just automatically fall in. I found that now with [the Middle Class Girls' School]. Like there was never a question of going anywhere else to school because it had a fantastic name and it was a parish school. (FG2M)

For some, either they or a member of their family had attended the school and were happy with it.

> My father went there.... All his brothers and sisters were there, we were all there so it was a family thing. (I3MM)

Feedback from family, work colleagues and friends, particularly if they were teachers, was important in helping parents decide on schools.

> My friend – my friend has her boy down there. Now he's doing his Junior Cert. She actually recommended [secondary school] for me and his teacher as well, his teacher does [coaching for the local GAA club] and he recommends the [secondary school] as well. (I7DM)

Those not from the locality can find it difficult to access this inside information.

> It is sort of quite hard – it is quite hard to make those decisions about school and I am not from Dublin and ..... I just did not know this area and ..... I didn't know a single person who had children in this area either. Most of my friends didn't – or do not have children ..... and it is amazing, once you get it to it, your children then go to school and you start circulating with other parents, within a few years you have the whole school system. (I6MM)

To ensure that their children attended a school with 'nice kids' (I2DM), they monitored the behaviour of the pupils, both past and present, of the various local schools.

> The other thing would be and it is probably myself (sic) - I went to [the local secondary school] and I see the girls coming out. Isn't that awful? I feel an awful snob, but they have that look about them and I say 'Noooo'. I do not want her to go there..... Now it could be me really getting old and that. I see them all with the make-up and the hair and all that. (I3MM)

The size and amount of resources available to the school were important features with the middle class father defining resources in the following terms:

> All sort of resources – in terms of physical building, in terms of playground, in terms of teaching resources, obviously, good teachers, good ethos in the school, happy atmosphere in the school, good pro-active parents committee who have a say in the running of the school. (I4MF)

The 'approachability' of the school, along with its support system and handling of misbehaviour was also an important quality to all parents.

> For me it is an approachable school. People in it have to be approachable. A school with a lot of rules and regulations, I have to honest with you and to me a support system is a big plus. (I8DM)

4.4.5 Summary

While most parents wanted the best for their children, there were differences between the middle class and the disadvantaged respondents in their hopes and fears for their children. Middle class parents were also more active in researching and choosing schools. In choosing a school, the 'good name' and academic reputation of the school was a primary consideration. While feedback from family, work colleagues and friends, particularly if they were teachers, was influential, parents also monitored the academic progress and behaviour of the pupils, both past and present, who attended the school.

4.5 Social Capital

According to Putnam (2000 p.296), a child's development is powerfully shaped by the social capital of their parents. This section examines the variety of supports that parents find useful in helping them to educate and rear their children. It also looks at parents' networks and how they are used to inform their decisions about their children's education and schooling.

4.5.1 Sources of support and advice

Participants got support and advice on educating and rearing their children from various places. They were most likely to get support and advice on bringing up and educating their children from their immediate family members, in particular their parents and their partner (Table 1.15). Quite a few found their own children a useful source of support and advice. Outside the family circle, their child's teacher, their friends and other parents were important supports. Fewer participants got advice and support from parenting courses, the school principal, the Church and neighbours.

Table 1.15
Sources of support and advice for respondents on bringing up and educating their children

Sources of support and advice	N	%
Family	198	**78**
Grandparents	170	**67**
Partner	162	**64**
Child's teacher	159	**63**
Friends	136	**54**
Their children	107	**42**
Other parents	107	**42**
Books	95	**37**
Parenting courses	65	**26**
School principal	58	**23**
Newspapers and magazines	51	**20**
Television	46	**18**
The Church	43	**17**
Neighbours	36	**14**
Public health nurse	34	**13**
Their doctor	31	**12**
Internet	23	**9**
Home school teachers	13	**5**
Social workers	11	**4**
Gardai	7	**3**
Therapist	7	**3**

Very few considered the professional services, apart from teachers, supportive. While a few found the public health nurse and their doctor helpful, other professionals such as the HSCL teachers, social workers, Gardai or therapists were not perceived to be a useful source of advice and support in rearing their children. Apart from books, the media like newspapers or magazines, television or even the Internet was not considered helpful. However, one interviewee did mention using the 'Super Nanny' techniques from a television programme when disciplining her child but did not appear to find them very effective.

> He's [the three year old] a devil. He throws tantrums. He throws things..... I have been trying Super Nanny, positive reinforcement and all that kind of stuff with him and I used to put him out in the hall but now he just walks out himself now and closes the door. It is totally wasted on him (I3MM)

Most interviewees felt that you needed to go to someone whose opinion you respected. 'Teacher friends' or teachers who taught in a school other than the one you sent your children were a very useful sounding board to middle class parents.

> Or someone that you know and respect and valued their opinion who already had
>
> I think I would ring another teacher from another school. I have a teacher friend so. They would be a lot of support because they would be dealing with the situation and would know.
>
> Somebody with experience (FG2M)

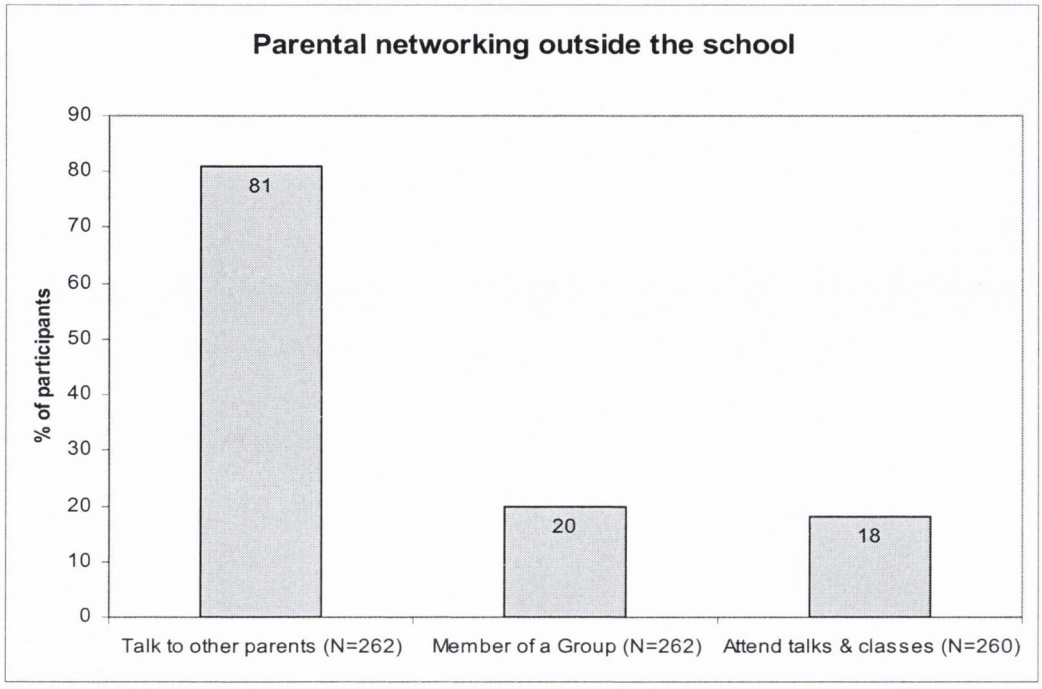
4.5.2 Parental Networks

It was interesting to observe how parents networked locally to get information on parenting issues, schools and individual teachers. They used this information along with their cultural and economic capital to influence the schools' agendas and to supplement the education being provided by the school.

Parents can network with other parents outside the school in three ways. They can talk with other parents informally at the school, shops or other venues, join a group outside the school and/or attend talks and classes organised for parents. The majority (81% N=212) of respondents to the questionnaire talked to other parents about the school (Figure 1.4). Most, like the women in this middle class focus group, felt that they were a most useful source of information.

> In the school yard listening to
>
> Exactly
>
> Or in the supermarket every morning
>
> 'Cause that's where you hear it all
>
> That's exactly where you hear it all
>
> Talking to others
>
> Ear to the ground really (FG2M)

Figure 1.4



From my observations, these conversations happened informally and were unplanned. Particularly around times of transitions, parents made a concerted effort to gather information about the school they were hoping that their child would attend.

> One Saturday morning at a local shop, I stood discussing a local mixed second level school with a friend. We were asked by a mother, who was passing by, if we were talking about the transition year in the local boys' secondary school. A discussion on our children and their study habits followed. She mentioned that she had two girls and I asked her what school they were attending. When she said the local girls' secondary school that my daughter was hoping to go to, I asked her how they were getting on. Then another mother joined in and said that her three girls had gone there and that it was a great school. (FN03-06-06)

Support networks can also be used to establish standards and check if the teacher is doing her or his job.

> One of [my child's] friends would be on the other half – there are two classes in the year .... you always try not to compare like but the other girl was reading more and quicker than [my child] and was that down to the two girls or down to the teachers and then another friend of ours moved down the country last year and sort of by the end of the year, she was flying along in terms of reading and what not, you know, you say to yourself –well so be it let the teacher do what the teacher does at the teacher's own pace as long as you are happy that the teacher is sort of competent and up to the job. (I4MF)

Few respondents used other methods to network with other parents. Only 18% (N=46) went to talks and classes organised for parents outside the school. Less than a quarter (20% N=51) of respondents to the questionnaire were involved with other organisations outside the school. These ranged from sporting, community and Church groups. 8% (N=21) were involved in various sporting and leisure organisations. These included the local Gaelic Athletic Association, soccer, swimming and athletic clubs

along with dancing and drama. The same amount (8% N=21) were involved in community groups such as the residents' associations, community games and neighbourhood watch. Three (1%) were doing a course, while only five (2%) were involved in Church activities.

4.5.3 Social Capital

A wide range of variables influenced the social capital of the respondents in this research. These included gender, religious belief, social class including education and lone parenting. Family size and the age of the respondents' children also influenced their perceptions of their support network. As highlighted previously in section one, many of these variables are interrelated.

Regular attendees at church appeared to be better networkers. Seventy-one percent (N=153) of those who spoke to other parents about the school attended church monthly. Similarly, 85% (N=41) of those who were member of a group outside the school attended church at least once a month. As can be seen from Table1.16, the majority (96% N=43) of those who attended talks and classes outside the school attended church at least once a month.

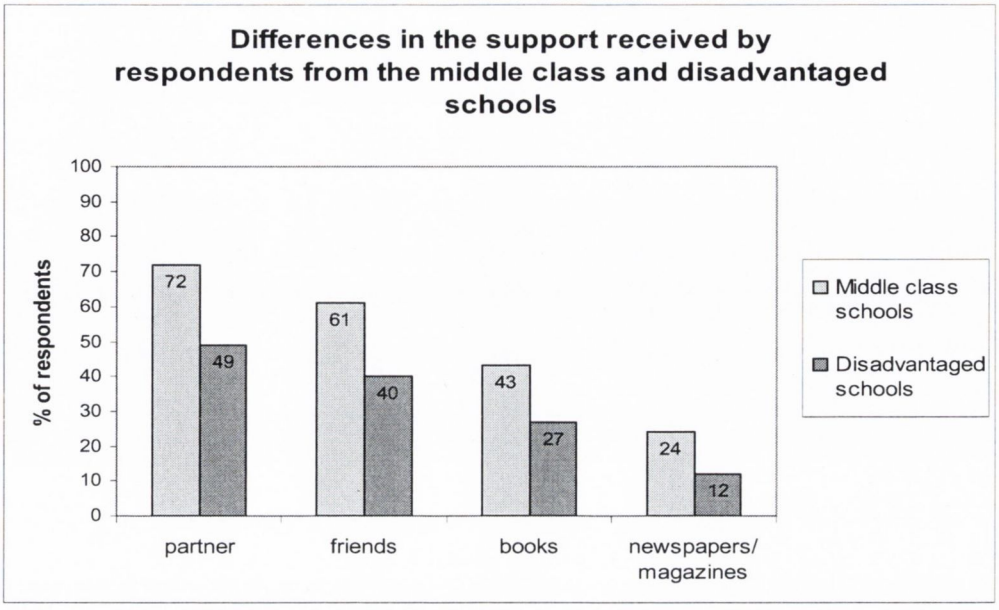
Table 1.16
Influence of attendance at church on attendance at talks and class organised for parents outside the school

Variable	Attended talks and classes organised for parents outside the school		Did not attend talks and classes organised for parents outside the school		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attended church weekly	28	**27**	76	**73**	104	**100**
Attended church once a month	15	**20**	59	**80**	74	**100**
Attended church less frequently	2	**3**	64	**97**	66	**100**
Total	45	**18**	199	**82**	244	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05

Middle class parents received more support from their partners, friends and the print media such as books, newspapers and magazines (Figure 1.5). This may reflect the respondents' higher education levels and the number of two-parent families in the middle class schools. It may also be an indication of the educational capital of their friends. 'Teacher' friends featured prominently in the interviews in the middle class schools.

Figure 1.5



Respondents from the middle class girls' school were more likely to attend talks and classes outside the school (Table1.17). These were more likely to be older and in two-parent families.

Table 1.17
Influence of school type on attendance at talks and class organised for parents outside the school

Variable	Attended talks and classes organised for parents outside the school		Did not attend talks and classes organised for parents outside the school		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Middle class girls' school	26	**30**	61	**70**	87	**100**
Middle class boys' school	14	**18**	64	**82**	78	**100**
Disadvantaged girls' school	5	**13**	35	**88**	40	**101***
Disadvantaged boys' school	1	**2**	54	**98**	55	**100**
Total	46	**18**	214	**82**	260	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

The principal brought all such talks and classes to the parents' notice through the newsletter. I attended a NPCP talk *Transition from Primary to Post Primary* (FN 08-05-06). Not only was there a large group of parents from the middle class girls' school present but the principal was also present. In the small groups, some parents commented on her presence and wondered was she 'spying' on them. At that particular talk, all the

parents present were from the middle class schools around the area, though a few had travelled further. There were no disadvantaged parents present.

The educational capital of the respondents also appeared to influence the amount of support respondents got (Table1.18). While some of the results are similar to above, those with primary education appeared to receive the least support even from their immediate family. Surprisingly, they were also less likely to find their child's class teacher, other parents and their neighbours supportive. Though not significant, only 67% (N=14) of those with a primary education discussed the school with other parents. Twelve of these attended church monthly. In contrast, 82% (N=189) of the more educated parents networked with others. Three-quarters (75% N= 135) of these attended church monthly.

Table 1.18
Difference in support received based on the respondents' level of education

Variable	Primary Level		Second Level		Third Level		Total who received support	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Family	9	**53**	129	**78**	51	**84**	189	**78**
Child's Teachers*	7	**41**	110	**67**	34	**56**	151	**62**
Partner	6	**35**	105	**64**	43	**71**	154	**63**
Friends	6	**35**	83	**50**	42	**69**	131	**54**
Their children*	5	**29**	65	**39**	32	**53**	102	**42**
Grandparents	4	**24**	116	**70**	47	**77**	167	**69**
Books	4	**24**	55	**33**	32	**53**	91	**37**
Other Parents*	3	**18**	72	**44**	28	**46**	103	**42**
Newspapers or magazines	2	**12**	28	**17**	20	**33**	50	**21**
Parenting Course*	2	**12**	41	**25**	19	**31**	62	**26**
Church*	1	**6**	28	**17**	13	**21**	42	**17**
Neighbours*	0	**0**	22	**13**	13	**21**	35	**14**
Total number of respondents across education levels	**22**	**9**	**169**	**67**	**61**	**24**	**252**	**100**

* Not significant at p<.05

Obviously respondents from two-parent family were more likely than those in one-parent families to find their partner supportive (Table1.19). They could also rely more on their neighbours and the Church to support them in their parenting. Interestingly enough they were also more likely to consider books and the television a useful source of advice and support than those from one-parent families. While not significant, those in one-parent families were less likely to find other parents and parenting courses helpful. While there was no difference in whether they talked to other parents about the school, respondents in two-parent families (23% N=41) were more likely to attend parenting course outside the school than those in one-parent families (7% N=5). They (26% N=46) were also more likely to be a member of a group outside the school than lone parents (5% N=4).

Table 1.19
Difference in support received by one-parent and two-parent families

Variable	One-parent families		Two-parent families		Total who received support	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Other Parents**	24	**33**	81	**47**	105	**43**
Partner	18	**25**	141	**82**	159	**65**
Books	18	**25**	74	**43**	92	**38**
Newspapers or magazines**	11	**15**	38	**22**	49	**20**
Parenting Course**	12	**17**	50	**29**	62	**25**
Church	7	**10**	36	**21**	43	**18**
Television	7	**10**	36	**21**	43	**18**
Neighbours	5	**7**	30	**17**	35	**14**
Total number of respondents across family type	**74**	**30**	**177**	**71**	**251**	**101***

* Result of rounding to whole numbers
** Not significant at p<.05

Gender had an influence on parents' social capital. Mothers (58% N=125) got more support from their friends than fathers (35% N=8). They also (84% N=188) tended to talk to other parents more than fathers (52% N=12). In contrast, 87% (N=20) of fathers found their partners supportive compared with 63% (N=136) of mothers. This was influenced by the fact that more mothers were single parents. While 82% (N=116)

of mothers in two-parent families found their partners supportive, only 25% (N=17) of single parent mothers did.

There were also differences in relation to the gender of the respondents' children. Respondents in the girls' schools were more likely to find their own children a useful source of support and advice. Fifty percent (N=63) from the girls' schools found their own children supportive as compared to 34% (N=44) from the boys' school.

Family size also had an impact on the support respondents received (Table 1.20). Those with two children, who were more likely to be in two-parent families and middle class schools, appeared to have the best support network, though they were less likely to receive support from their own parents. They were also more likely to talk to other parents about the school. Eighty-six percent (N=140) of parents with two or three children talked to other parents about the school in comparison with 76% (N=29) of those with only one child and 68% (N=39) of those with four or more children.

Table 1.20
Impact of family size on the support received by respondents

Variable	One child		Two children		Three children		Four children		Total who received support	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Grandparents	24	**65**	48	**57**	61	**78**	36	**71**	169	**68**
Friends	18	**49**	56	**67**	42	**54**	18	**35**	134	**54**
Other Parents*	16	**43**	40	**48**	36	**46**	14	**28**	106	**42**
Partner	15	**41**	67	**80**	50	**64**	29	**57**	161	**64**
Books*	13	**35**	41	**49**	25	**32**	15	**29**	94	**38**
Newspapers or magazines*	12	**32**	18	**21**	15	**19**	5	**10**	50	**20**
Their children	9	**24**	45	**54**	36	**46**	16	**31**	106	**42**
Parenting Course*	6	**16**	26	**31**	17	**22**	14	**28**	25	**63**
Neighbours	3	**8**	19	**23**	11	**14**	3	**6**	36	**14**
Total number of respondents across family size	**38**	**15**	**85**	**33**	**78**	**30**	**58**	**22**	**259**	**100**

* Not significant at p<.05

Children's level of education influenced parental networking. Sixth class parents (68% N=50) networked less than other parents (86% N=162). Interestingly, while 81%

(N=128) of the second, fourth and sixth class respondents who networked with other parents attended church monthly, only 60% (N=25) of senior infant parents did. It may be that as one interviewee (I5MM) stated that second class is when the Church begins to play a more influential part in their children's school life and parents have to decide whether they are going to conform to the norms of the ethos of the school.

4.5.4 Summary

Parents received support and advice on educating and rearing their children from their partners, family, friends and the school. Very few mentioned the other professional services as a source of advice and support. While social class, gender, family size and form all influenced the amount of support the respondents received, those with lower levels of education appeared to be the most 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002) group of parents.

Parents mainly networked with other parents. Less than a quarter were involved with other organisations outside the school and even fewer went to talks and classes organised for parents outside the school. Attendance at church was one of the most important variables, which determined how involved parents were with others outside the school. These parents were mostly older, from the middle class schools, in two-parent families and had two or more children.

4.6 Parental Involvement as Home Educators

School is only one dimension of children's education. Parents complement the work of the school by engaging in a variety of educational activities with their children at home (Reay 1998 p.68). These include teaching values and beliefs as much literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, parents compensate for any gaps they perceive in their children's education by paying for extra-curricular activities and private tutors. This section examines the home curriculum provided by the participants. The variables which influence this curriculum are highlighted.

4.6.1 Parents as Educators

Teaching children how to behave was an important part of the home curriculum. Though some of the middle class parents were reluctant to admit that they had rules, all the parents interviewed had certain behaviours that they actively encouraged. These

varied from encouraging children to be polite to others, tidy up after themselves, help with chores, eat good food, do their homework, go to bed on time to warning them against watching too much television, using bad language and fighting.

> Well I suppose certainly – and we do not have a top – there are no top two rules in this house but one of the main things is that I do not allow my children to sit and watch TV unless I know what they are watching and I really object to a lot of this rubbish that is on television so it would be what comes up most. The other rule is that … certain times they need to go to bed and that's it. They might see that as sort of a rule but there aren't rules as such. (I6MM)

Parents used sanctions like reprimanding their children, sending them to their rooms, not allowing them out to play along with depriving them of things like television and sweets when they misbehaved. Two parents with younger children used the 'bold step'. However strategies like modelling good behaviour were seen as more effective in encouraging children to behave.

> Try to set good examples and I do not expect them to tidy up if I leave a mess all over the place. I wouldn't expect them to try and help if I do not help so it is very much a question of we would, as parents, we would try and set the example ….. (14MF)

In fact, most parents felt that, having taught their children how to behave from early childhood, they had very few behavioural problems.

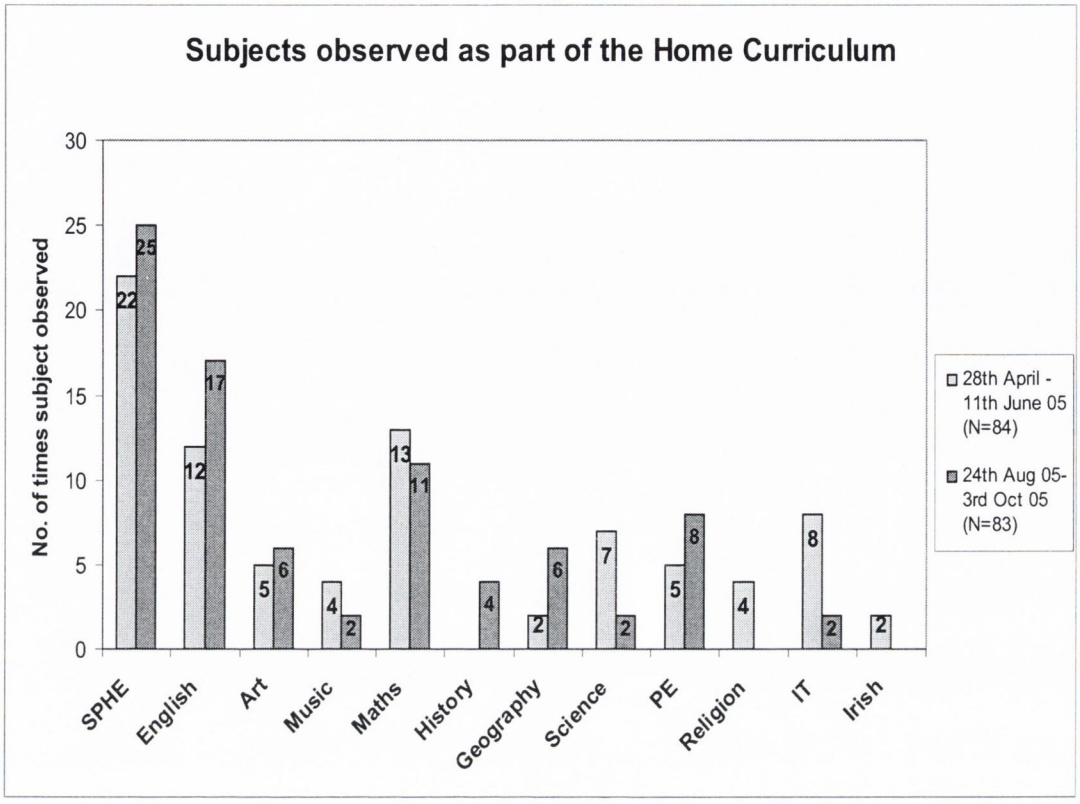
> Basically if she doesn't, like she knows because I taught her that way from the time she was born, she knows bad language is a no go definitely whether here or in school or out on the street and anyway it doesn't work. Her room – she's a great kid. She has it done every morning when she gets up, before she goes to school, so there is no giving out to her if you get me. The odd time she will have a falling down and say, "I'm not doing it" and I say, "That's fine you are not watching telly" and then she says, "All right, Okay". (I2DM)

Finding time to engage in educational activities with children was difficult for some parents, especially if they were in paid employment.

> When I can. Oh God, between two jobs it is hard. She's home from school, it is like spend an hour with her, clean up, get the dinner on and then I'm back out to work. Really I do not spend enough time with her as much as I'd like to. 'Cause if I do not work we do not have anything so I have to work *laughs*. (I2DM)

As a parent, one of the most surprising aspects of my observations on how I supported my children's learning was the frequency and variety of the activities that we engaged in (Figure 1.6). Most of this was done informally. The items recorded were major discrete incidents. Routine activities like the use of the computer, playing games and looking after animals were not recorded. Normal everyday conversation was not included. Visual Arts included formal lessons as well as informal activities done at home.

Figure 1.6



The following observations as taken from my field diary give some idea of the kind of activities involved in the home curriculum.

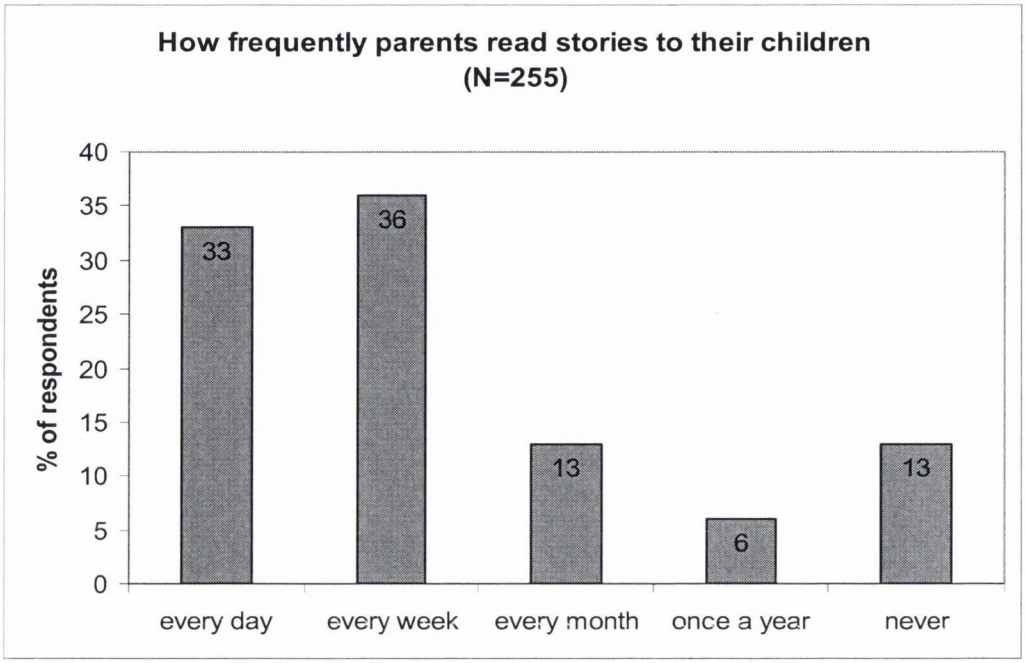
> D2 helped me make flat pack bookcases. She measured out where nails should go (FN 24-05-05)

> D2 was reading a book. She wanted to read ½ of it and asked me, 'What is ½ of 132?' I asked her, 'What was ½ of 13?' and then, 'What was half of 12?' (FN 08-06-05)

> D2 was trying to compose a song on the key board for her dad's birthday and father's day. She was exploring sounds and asked me what I thought. I said it sounded like Beethoven and she said she had heard of him in school. When her sister came up to complain that it was late and she wanted to sleep, she asked her did she want to hear her Beethoven music. (FN 11-06-05)

As outlined in Chapter Three, it was not possible to include parents' diaries in this research. However, respondents to the questionnaire were asked how frequently they engaged in educational activities at home. Most (69% N=175) respondents read a story to their child at least once a week (Figure 1.7). Many of those who never read to their child wrote on the questionnaires that it was unnecessary as their children were able to read for themselves. This was evident when one analysed the results. Only 40% (N=29) of the sixth class parents read to their children at least once a week in comparison with almost all (94% N=46) of senior infant parents. In fact, 31% (N=22) of sixth class parents never read stories to their children.

Figure 1.7

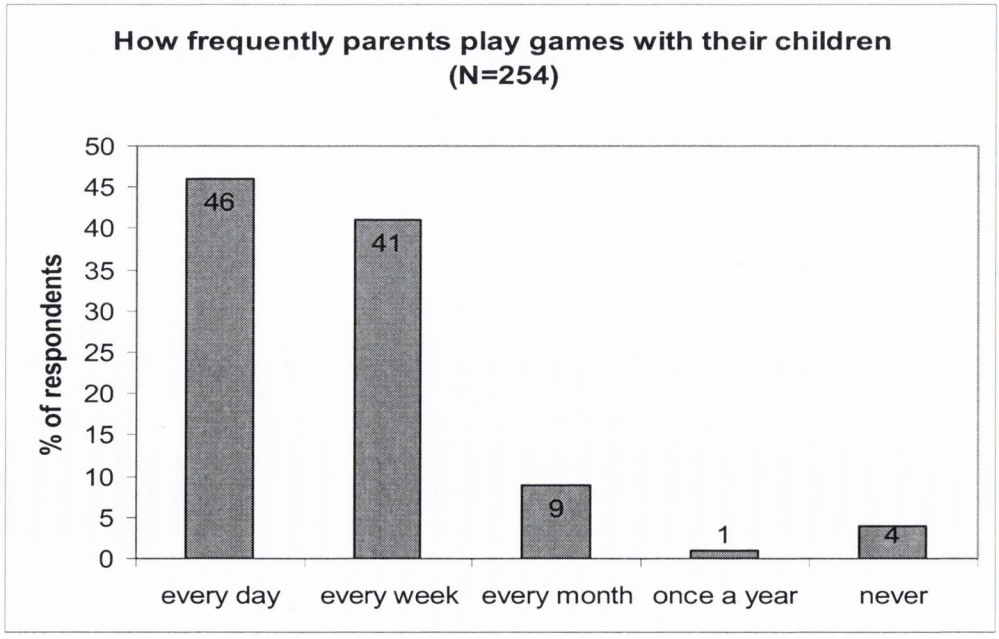


Those who were interviewed also encouraged their children to read. One parent described the culture of reading for pleasure in her home as follows:

> They have loads [of books]. They read a lot. They'd all read in bed. The youngest one is just about able to. Although one of the nice kind (sic) of progression is that the middle girl has taken to reading to her. The first child reads of course but she reads on her own now to herself and loves doing that and she likes then reading to her younger sister. It is all a positive reinforcement of her skill and that kind of thing. Yes they all read in bed. Well they read outside it as well. (I5MM)

Eight-seven percent (N=220) of parents played with their children at least once a week (Figure 1.8).

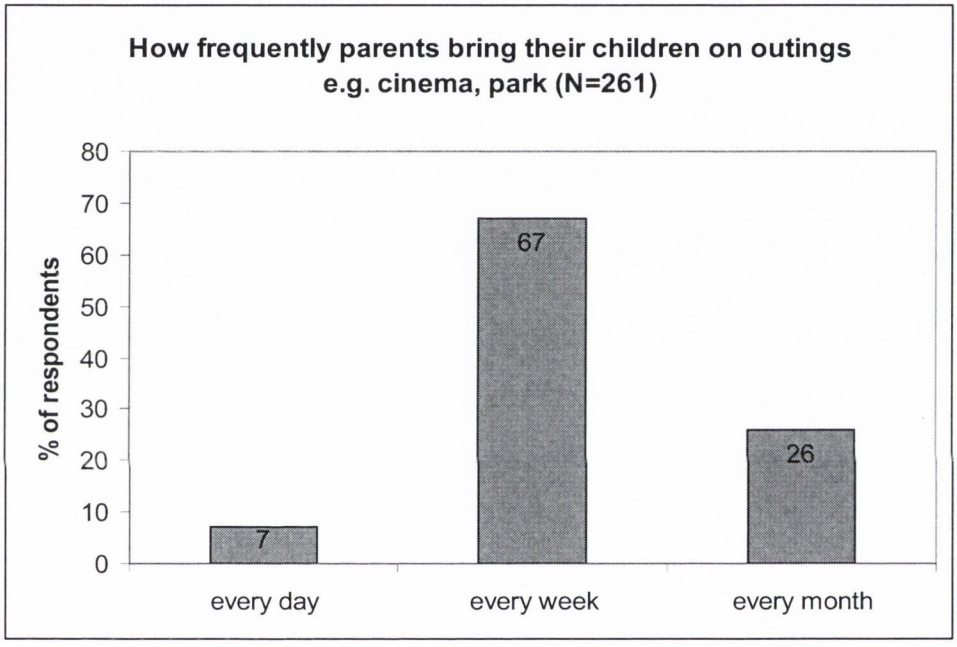
Figure 1.8



Respondents with only one child were more likely to play with their children. Forty-two percent (N=89) of those with two or more children played with their children daily as compared to 71% (N=27) of parents with one child. Parents were also more likely to play with their children if they were younger. Over half (56% N=72) the parents in the junior classes played with their children on a daily basis as compared to 36% (N=45) of parents with children in the senior classes.

Practically 100% (N=260) of parents brought their children on an outing at least once a month, while 74% (N=192) went once a week (Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9



Frequently these outings are used by parents to teach children skills.

> My daughter and I were in the local park. I was teaching her how to use the swings on her own and go down the fireman's pole. A couple in their late twenties arrived in the park. They had a baby in a buggy and a young boy of about three or four. They had brought a basket ball and between them were teaching the boy how to play basket ball. Even though he could not throw high enough to get a basket, they showed him how to dribble and pass the ball. (FN 05-03-06)

Middle class interviewees, in particular, described the educational opportunities the outings provided.

> I am a horticulturalist and I am passionate about nature and the environment and art. My children have gone to art galleries, they meet – they do a huge amount of travelling because we are in the …… business. They are very well socialised and they're – what I notice if I go to the Botanic Gardens …… my children have their noses stuck in to flowers, they're smelling them, they're talking about them, looking at them …... they're aware, hugely aware of their environment and I think that type of education is absolutely invaluable. I suppose we would spend an awful lot of time doing things together as a family. That would have been always - sure if you are up the mountains or if you down the country visiting grandparents or whatever, I think that children can be taught to be aware of the birds, be aware of everything. It is a fantastic education. (I6MM)

Respondents from one-child families brought their children on outings more frequently. The larger the family the less likely they were to take their children on outings (Table 1.21). Younger children tended to be brought on more outings than older children. Eighty-two percent (N=107) of parents in the junior classes brought their children on outings once a week in comparison to 65% (N=85) of those in the senior classes.

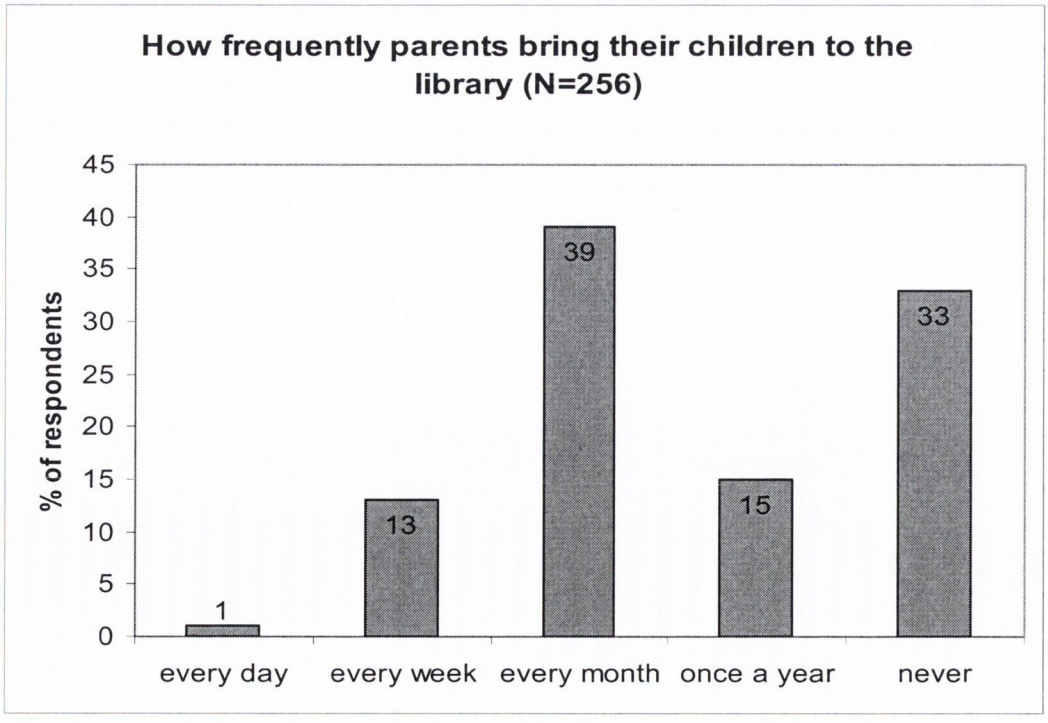
Table 1.21
Influence of family size on the number of times parents brought their children on outings

Variable	Weekly		Monthly		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
One child	34	**90**	4	**11**	38	**101***
Two children	66	**79**	18	**21**	84	**100**
Three children	56	**73**	21	**27**	77	**100**
Four or more children	33	**59**	23	**41**	56	**100**
Total	189	**74**	66	**26**	255	**100**

X^2=.006 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

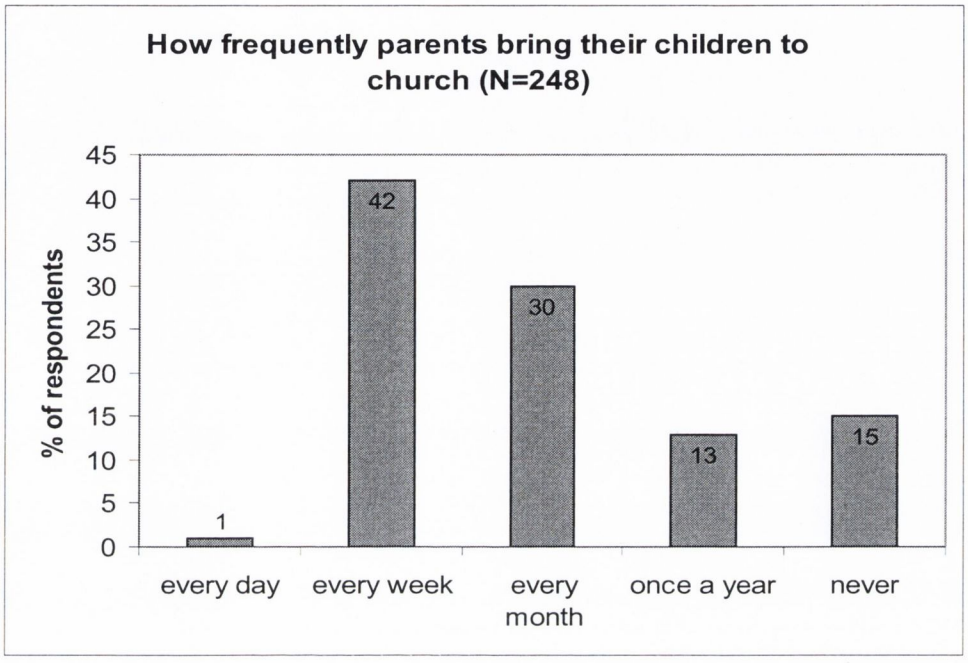
While only 14% (N=35) of respondents brought their children to the library once a week, 52% (N=134) brought their children at least once a month (Figure 1.10). However, 33% (N=85) never brought their children to the library.

Figure 1.10



Forty-three percent (N=106) of respondents brought their children to church once a week, while 73% (N=180) brought them once a month (Figure 1.11). While 13% (N=32) brought them once a year, 15% (N= 36) never brought their children to church.

Figure 1.11



The ethos of school had an influence on the interviewees' decision to bring their children to Mass.

> It [the catholic ethos] has become more so. It usen't (sic) be – when [my eldest child] was in first class, you know making her communion; we use to go to Mass every Sunday. You know the way you can tell a child who is making their communion and has been in Church three times. They are looking around admiring all the art work. When the organ sounds they are saying 'oh where is that coming from?' I didn't want her to be one of those. I felt that if you were making your communion you should have some sense of why you are doing it. So she kept that up and then I've gone consistently with each of them ever since. (I5MM)

Most felt that they enrolled their children in a Catholic school and had to play by the rules for their children's sakes. They feared that their child would be excluded and bullied if they did not conform to the norm.

> What you do not want for your child is to ostracise her, is that what you call it? You know when you make her like. If the school runs the Catholic ethos and they go over to the Church to say prayers, we'll have Holy Communion, we'll have Confirmation then my child goes through that as well because the one thing is that you have to be is a team player. Like I am not going to come along and say when everyone is going to Church my child will stay outside. I think she should be with the people and not left out because that's when she gets picked on, that's when she gets the finger pointed. (I1DGF)

Attendance at church was influenced by the school the respondents' children attended. As can be seen from Table 1.22 the respondents from the girls' school, especially the middle class girls' school, attended Church more frequently than those in the other

schools. Parents of younger boys, in particular, were reluctant to bring them to church. Only 12% (N=3) brought their children to church in senior infants in comparison with 50% (N=11) of senior infant parents in the girls' schools.

Table 1.22
The frequency with which respondents from the four schools attended church

Variable	Weekly		Once a month		Less frequently		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Disadvantaged boys' school	15	**29**	18	**35**	18	**35**	51	**99***
Disadvantaged girls' school	16	**44**	7	**19**	13	**36**	36	**99***
Middle class boys' school	28	**38**	22	**30**	23	**32**	73	**100**
Middle class girls' school	47	**53**	27	**31**	14	**16**	88	**100**
Total	106	**43**	74	**30**	68	**27**	248	**100**

X^2=.036 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

The age of the respondents had an influence on their attendance at church (Table 1.23) with younger parents less likely to attend.

Table 1.23
Relationship between the age of the respondent and the frequency with which they brought their children to church

Variable	Weekly		Once a month		Once a year or never		Totals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Aged under thirty	9	**23**	9	**23**	22	**55**	40	**101***
Aged between thirty and thirty-nine	47	**44**	29	**27**	31	**29**	107	**100**
Aged over forty	50	**51**	35	**35**	14	**14**	99	**100**
Total	106	**43**	73	**30**	67	**27**	246	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Those with only one child were less likely to take their children to church than those with two or more children (Table 1.24).

Table 1.24
Relationship between family size and the frequency with which respondents brought their children to church

Variable	Weekly		Once a month		Once a year or never		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
One child	11	**29**	8	**21**	19	**50**	38	**100**
Two or more children	95	**46**	64	**31**	47	**23**	206	**100**
Total	106	**43**	72	**30**	66	**27**	244	**100**

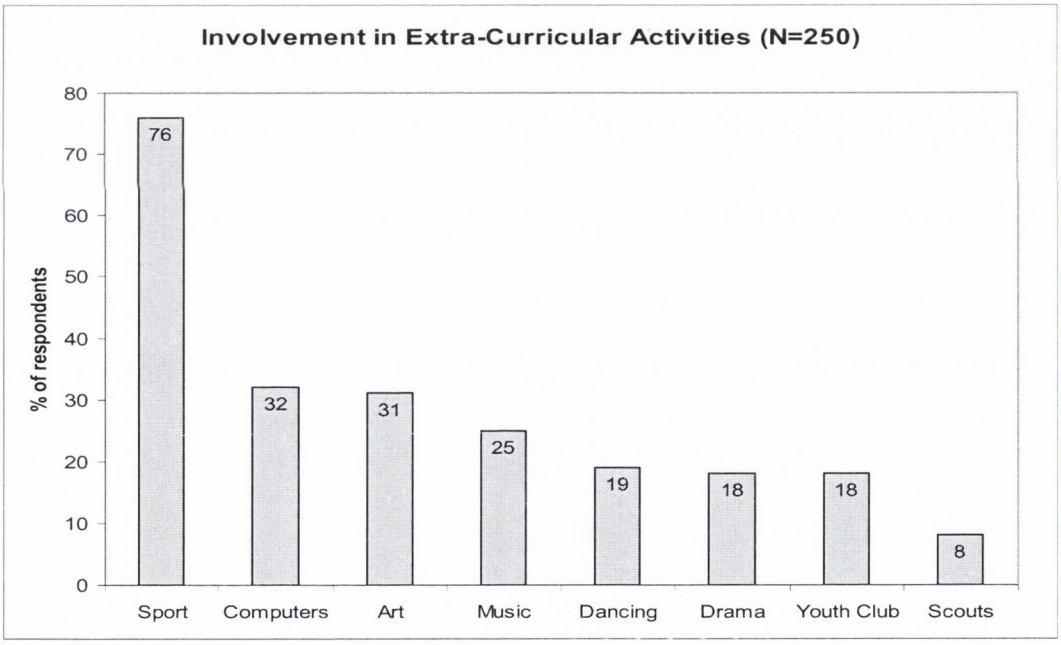
X^2=.002 p<.05

4.6.2 Extra-curricular activities

Ninety-two percent (N=243) of children were involved in some form of extra-curricular activity with sport being the most popular. Three-quarters (76% N=189) of respondents' children were involved in sport (Figure 1.12). While swimming and football, either soccer or Gaelic, were the most popular forms of sport mentioned, children were also involved in basketball, tennis, boxing, karate, gymnastics, hurling and rugby. One even played golf once a month (Q162MBSI). As can be seen from the following timetable, many children had a full schedule.

Running club	Tues	
Karate	Tues	
Water polo	Wed	
Scouts	Thurs	
Basketball	Fri	
Swimming lessons	Sat	
Lifesaving	Sun	(Q148MB2)

Figure 1.12



Other extra-curricular activities included computers, art, music, dancing, youth clubs, drama and scouts or guides. Piano, choir, singing, drums and guitar were mentioned as the musical activities that children engaged in. Irish dancing was the most popular form of dancing

Those who were interviewed were very enthusiastic about their children's involvement in extra-curricular activities. They felt that not only were the activities beneficial to their children's well-being and development but that 'the more they're

occupied outside school, the less time they have to get involved with trouble and everything' (I2DM).

> Oh mine are involved in every sport there is. So *laughter* between drama and dancing, football and basketball and hurling, there is always something going on in my house. They got in to them when they were younger. The young fella [sic] was playing football since he could walk, I think. The girl always had a love of singing, dancing, so she found drama classes so she does that. She loves hurling so she does that, but it was camogie in school, that's how that started -in school. [My son] does football in school and basket ball in school and wall climbing and all them [sic] things. (I8DM)

As can be seen from the quote, many of the extra-curricular activities were school-related in that school either organised them or provided a venue.

The gender of the respondent made little difference to the extra-curricular activities their children were involved with. From my observations of parents collecting their children from swimming classes on Saturday mornings (FN 01-04-06 to 24-06-06), fathers and mothers were just as involved. Mothers were in the majority on only two occasions. One was on the day of an important football match when seventeen mothers and only three fathers collected their children (FN 20-06-06). The other was the day of the swimming gala when twenty six mothers and ten fathers attended the event (FN 10-04-06). However, on the way home we passed a local park, where a GAA match was taking place and there were more fathers present than mothers. My husband tells me that fathers far outnumber mothers at the under-sixteen Gaelic football matches.

However, gender stereotyping influenced attendance at extra-curricular activities, with many respondents appearing to hold traditional views on 'appropriate' activities for boys and girls. Girls were more likely to do dancing, drama and music, whereas boys were more likely to do computers. Forty percent (N=51) of boys did computers as compared to 23% (N=28) of girls.

Dancing was obviously considered a 'girly' thing with 37% (N=45) of children in the girls' schools being involved in some form of dance. Only two boys did dancing. Music and drama appeared to be similar. While 31% (N=38) from the girls' school did music, only 20% (N=25) from the boys' school did. Similarly, while 28% (N=34) from the girls' schools did drama, 9% (N=11) from the boys' schools did. It was also remarkable that children in the disadvantaged girls' school appeared to play less sport than the children attending any of the other schools (Table1.25).

Table 1.25
Differences between the schools in their pupils' involvement in sport

Variable	Involved in Sport		Not involved in Sport		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Disadvantaged Boys' School	39	**78**	11	**22**	50	**100**
Disadvantaged Girls' School	16	**43**	21	**57**	37	**100**
Middle Class Boys' School	68	**87**	10	**13**	78	**100**
Middle Class Girls' School	66	**78**	19	**22**	85	**100**
Total	189	**76**	61	**24**	250	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05

Just as the children's gender influenced their choice of extra-curricular activities, social class was also influential. Thirty-seven percent (N=32) of children in the disadvantaged schools were members of a youth club as compared to only 7% (N=12) of children from the middle class schools. In contrast, while 12% (N=19) of children from the middle class schools were involved in the scouts/guides, only 2% (N=2) of the children from the disadvantaged schools were.

There were also differences in their response to the open question about their children's extra-curricular activities. Children in disadvantaged schools appeared to be involved in a more limited set of activities. While football, basketball, pool, boxing and swimming were listed for both sets of schools, children in the middle class schools were also involved in karate, running, hurling, horse riding, water polo, chess, tennis and gymnastics. A few middle class parents mentioned that their children went to the gym. Similarly, a variety of dance forms such as hip-hop, majorettes, ballet, ballroom, tap and disco were mentioned for the middle class children. Several were involved with various stage schools. In contrast, only Irish dancing was listed for the children in the disadvantaged schools.

Social class also influenced children's leisure activities. While middle class parents said that their children read, "played with friends" (Q201MG4), did "sewing, knitting" (Q174MG6) and French, they also described their children as doing

> Writing, film making, reading, photography, cinema, plays (theatre) (Q118MB6)
>
> Cycles, walks, poems & song writing, (Q190MG6)

Parents in the disadvantaged schools, on the other hand, mentioned things like reading, going to the playground, "plays games with his brother/sister" (Q55DBSI), "skipping rope, playing chasing" (Q71DG4) along with

> Dancing, singing, playing games, writing, reading (Q87DGSI)

The class the children were in had an impact on their participation in extra-curricular activities. Apart from computers, drama and music, participation decreased as the child grew older. While 38% (N=48) of children in the junior classes did art, only 24% (N=30) in the senior classes did art. Similarly, while 26% (N=33) of those in the junior classes were involved with dancing, only 11% (N=14) of children from the senior classes were. Sport was interesting in that children in fourth class were most likely to be involved with sports (Table 1.26). Participation declined in sixth class.

Table 1.26
Impact of class on children's involvement in sport

Variable	Involved In Sport		Not involved in Sport		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
6th class	54	**76**	17	**24**	71	**100**
4th class	49	**91**	5	**9**	54	**100**
2nd class	55	**71**	23	**30**	78	**101***
Senior Infants	31	**66**	16	**34**	47	**100**
Total	189	**76**	61	**24**	250	**100**

X^2=.017 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

4.6.3 Summary

All participants in this research appeared to support their children's learning at home. From my own observations, the home curriculum embraces a wide variety of activities. Much of this goes unrecognised and unnoticed, even by parents themselves.

All the parents interviewed in this study had certain behaviours that they actively encouraged. Most respondents to the questionnaire read a story and played with their children at least once a week. While practically everyone brought their children on an outing at least once a month, only half brought them to the library. Almost two-thirds brought their children to Church at least once a month. The age and family size of the respondents, along with the stage their children were at, had an influence on how involved they were in the home curriculum.

The vast majority of children were involved in some form of extra-curricular activity, with sport being the most popular. Social class and gender influenced the type of activities children got involved with. Interestingly, participation declined as children progressed through the school in all areas apart from art and computers.

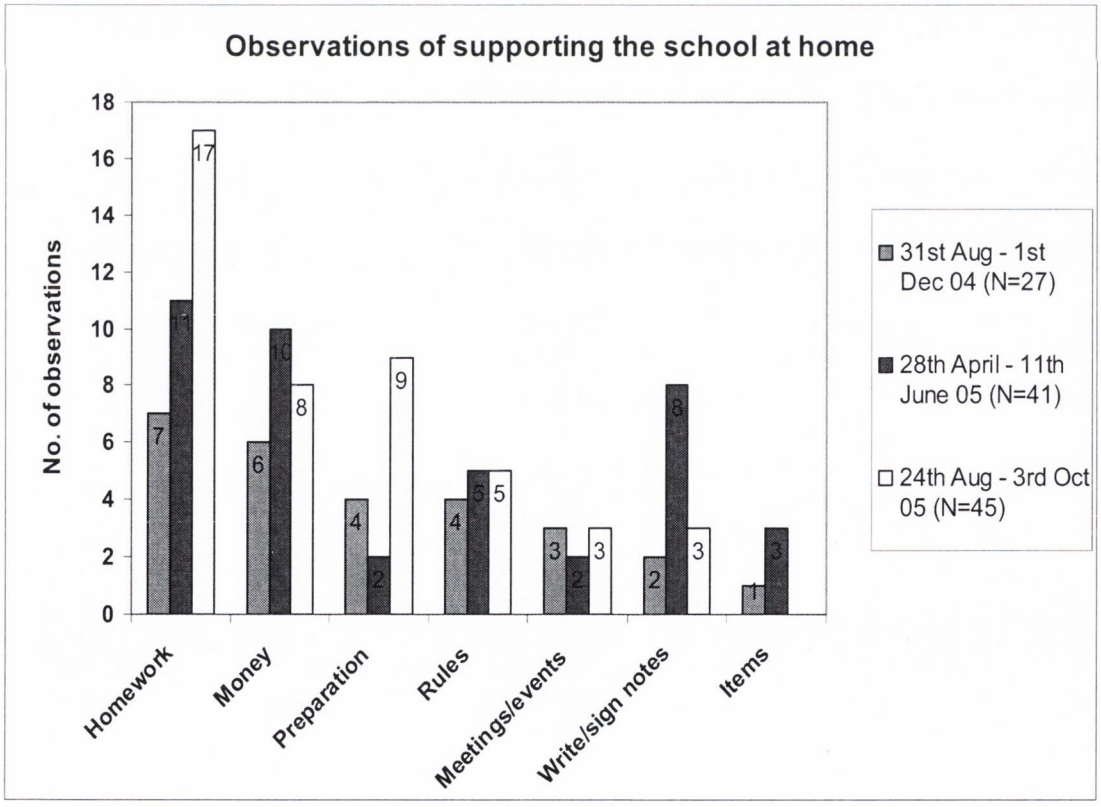
4.7 Supporting the School at Home

Most mothers in Reay's (1998 p.66) study described their relationship to schooling as a supportive one in which they responded to teachers' requests to hear reading, learn tables and go over spellings with their children. This section looks at the ways parents supported the school, both informally and formally, at the home. Informal support includes activities such as monitoring how the child is doing at school, reinforcing the curriculum, enforcing the school rules along with providing supplementary resources. Helping with homework and paying for school items are the most typical ways parents support the school formally.

4.7.1 Observations of supporting the school at home

In my parents' diary I recorded the ways that I supported the school at home (Figure 1.13). This varied from doing homework, signing notes, attending events and preparing the child for school. The items included providing wood lice for a science lesson and costumes for the school concert.

Figure 1.13



The rules related to the times I reinforced the school rules at home for example by reminding my daughter that her hair was to be tied back or by collecting my daughter

from the concert at the time designated by the school. These observations do not include the routine homework such as checking work for mistakes or hearing spellings, tables and reading.

A lot of the support provided is informal and incidental. Having discussed the field diaries with the grandfather from the disadvantaged school, he too began to think about the times he had supported his granddaughter's learning and the school informally at home.

> It would be all out of school, what did you do in school, we done blah, blah, blah, but I'd tell her -like she said to me, "The teacher was going to do (sic) *The Guns of 1916"*. She was going to read the book. Now I have a hundred books at home..... I have all the martyred 1916 executed leaders on the wall so I said, 'Tell your teacher .... we have books if she wants books to read'. So that means she comes back to me and says, 'Oh yeah, I was telling my teacher that you have this on the wall'. Now the same with the Irish I'd be telling her I was in the Carra Rua..... I enjoyed it and I done a bit of Irish ..... she'll certainly talk to me about her Irish, which I found very interesting. She'll get words to put into sentences, you know. She had vaccine there the other night for instance. Get the dictionary out and look up vaccine. Now I know vaccine, there's vaccine, vaccination, what does the word vaccine mean? So I am getting educated. Now I know what the word vaccine means but I pretend surprise at this and she has to look up the dictionary.....When you sit down and think about it, you find you are involved an awful lot ..... when you think of all the questions you are asking over a period. (I1DGF)

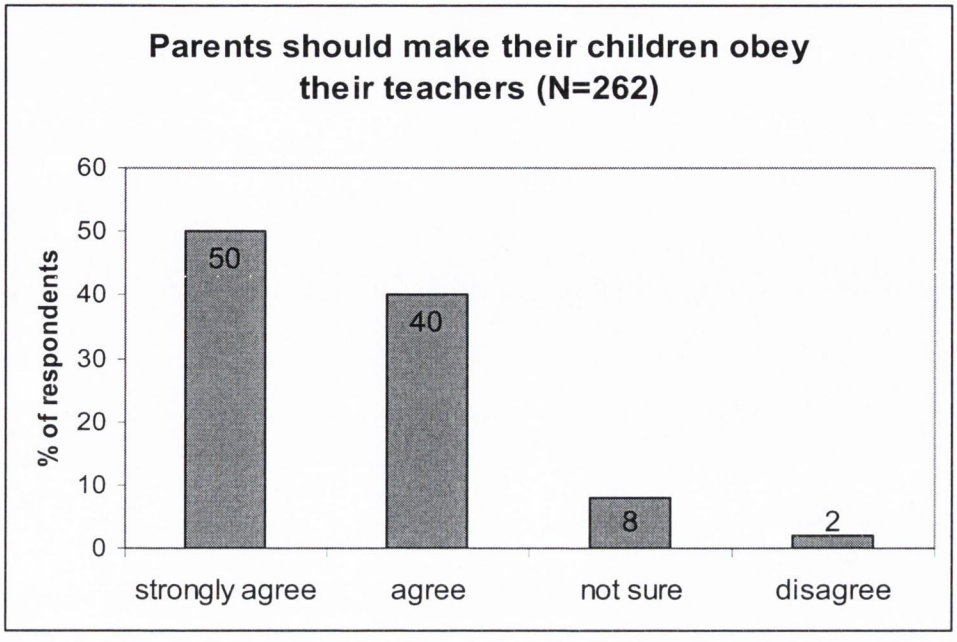
4.7.2 Supporting the School's Rules

With the introduction of the *Education Welfare Act 2000*, all schools are expected to have a Code of Behaviour that emphasises rewarding positive behaviour as well as the more traditional sanctioning of misbehaviour. Sixteen percent (N=43) of respondents had noticed changes in the school rules and the behaviour of children. Some felt that the pupil-teacher relationship had improved as a result while others thought that discipline standards had fallen and that there was a lack of respect for teachers from both parents and children.

> Respect for teachers and principals has changed with 'some' parents and then of course it moves on to the children. Discipline is slacking. Where are the nuns? (Q194MG6)

The vast majority (90% N=236) of respondents to the questionnaire felt that parents should make their children obey their teachers (Figure 1.14). Fifty percent (N=132) strongly agreed.

Figure 1.14



Those who were interviewed appeared to agree that parents should support the school rules.

> If I was called in over something that one of my girls did here I would support whatever the school felt was the appropriate punishment. I wouldn't necessarily side with my child just because she is my child. I would be seen to be supporting the school. (I5MM)

There were gender differences in the amount of knowledge interviewees had about the school rules. Mothers were more likely to mention the rules that their children talked or worried about the most.

> Being on time is one of the major ones she gets herself in a tizzy over. If we are running a couple of minutes late she's nearly having a heart attack. The food, not, you know, I think they are trying to curb the – the proper diet – I hear that with her. Those seem to be the ones I hear all the time (I3MM)

The men, while being aware of the school rules, found it difficult to list them.

> *What are the top two school rules?*
> The top two rules –*long pause* – ah Jesus, I wouldn't have a breeze. Look I could take a stab at it, you know. (I1DGF)

The middle class father, while also being unable to recall the school rules, felt that they permeated all aspects of school life and were reinforced by the teachers in a positive way.

Parents could describe the variety of sanctions schools used to encourage children to obey the rules. These included detentions, punishments, extra homework, being sent to the principal's office. Only one parent (I2DM) mentioned a reward system. Most felt that parents should be held responsible for their children's behaviour.

> They should call their parents up like and talk to them. I know a lot of the parents that have kids in the school are probably half not on this earth, em, They just need to get a little bit tougher, you know what I mean, they really do, they need to get a little bit tougher. I just think parents will sit back. (I2DM)

While parents supported the school in enforcing the rules, they also explained the rules to their children and helped them cope with demands and consequences of the rules.

> I'd back the school up with the rules, because you have to..... but definitely I do try to ease the fear a little bit .... this fear of the principal's office..... I try to allay that fear but at the same time she knows that she has to do as she's told. (I3MM)

Some felt that you had to explicitly teach children how to cope with the school's expectations and their handling of misbehaviour

> There is a lot of things you can teach your child, like if she had a bad experience in school like or she had a - if the principal approached her, not to be cheeky and just talk. Talking to someone is better than shouting in somebody's face
>
> Just how to get on
>
> How to deal with confrontation.....
>
> Have manners, whether she's getting bit off, her head is getting bitten off just to hold back and have manners.....
>
> And respect (FG1D)

Despite some consultation by the schools on certain issues, most parents felt that they had very little say over the school rules. However, most agreed that they would approach the school if they believed that a rule was unreasonable. While the rule would probably not be changed, they thought that the principal would do some thing about their concerns.

> If one of the teachers had a rule that I thought was completely ridiculous or whatever I would be happy enough to go to the teacher and say it.
> *But let us say it was a school rule and the teacher had no choice in it?*
> I do not know. I suppose you just have to live with it. (I5MM)

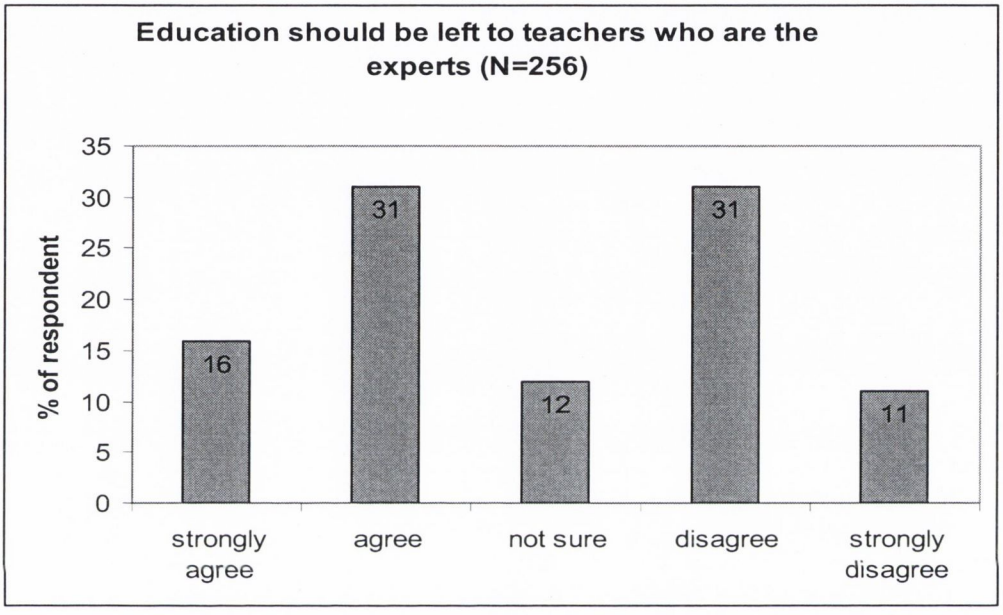
4.7.3 Supporting the School's Curriculum

Most (87% N=225) respondents to the questionnaires agreed that parents needed help from teachers to educate their children. One respondent suggested that teachers also needed "the help of parents to make learning and education a positive experience" (Q161MGSI). Similarly those who were interviewed saw the teachers' and parents' role as complementary and felt that there should be continuity between home and school.

> I seen them as being complementary rather than being - That there's continuity rather than the strict demarcation line between school and I think it is better for them [children] if they see more of a flow in the whole thing. (I5MM)

Respondents to the questionnaire were almost equally divided on whether 'teaching should be left to the teachers who are the experts' (Figure 1.15). Respondents with a primary education were more likely to agree that they should leave their children's education to the expertise of the teachers. Nearly three-quarters (70% N=14) agreed with this statement as compared with 43% (N=96) of those with higher levels of education.

Figure 1.15



Those who were interviewed also agreed that their children's education was too important to be left to the teachers. If children were to succeed in school, parents needed to play their part.

> I think to keep a good eye on it. I think it is up to you really. The teacher can only do so much. It is up to the parents to do the homework and if there is a problem to go in about it.
>
> (FG2M)

Keeping 'a good eye' on their children progress helped them to spot if their child was experiencing difficulties in school and either help the child themselves or seek help from the school. Some parents felt that their knowledge of their children was not acknowledged or recognised by the school. When they identified learning difficulties, their concerns were not addressed and their children's needs went unsupported by the school.

> I felt let down by the school in regards to my middle child. I noticed his reading and spelling was poor compared to his oral ability. I brought it to the attention of his 1st class teacher. I was told he did not qualify for remedial reading or any help. All school year I tried and kept in close contact with the teacher. In second class I was told he now qualifies for help. I met with the remedial reading teacher. He told me he was not going to help my child read phonetically but through poetry and different methods. I kept in close contact all school year. I sometimes got the impression from the school principal & teachers that I was being a fussy mother but I knew

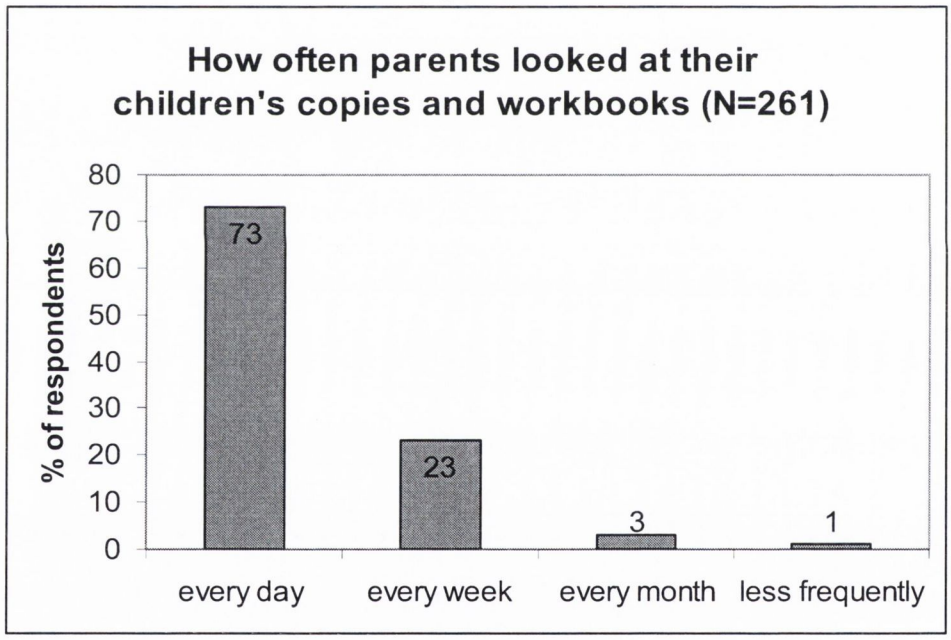
> something was wrong. After much pressure from me the school organised tests and we discovered that he is severely dyslexic. Both myself and my husband had to make a hard decision that he needed to go to a reading school. He is now at this school learning to read through phonics. I am very disappointed with the school and the lack of back up I received when given this news (no back up). My fears were not given consideration and I felt very much on my own regards my sons' education. (Q110MB6)

Daily discussions about the school with their children gave parents an insight into how their children were getting on. It also gave their children an opportunity to share any difficulties that they may have with them.

> Besides the child will say it themselves when they get in from school how they are getting on, if they find anything hard and when you are doing homework it is fairly obvious if they are having problems. They are going to learning resource and it was obvious with the first one that went there that she was having difficulties with reading. (I5MM)

Parents also got a lot of information from their children's copies and workbooks with the majority (99% N=258) checking them at least once a month (Figure 1.16).

Figure 1.16



One mother (Q145MB2) complained that her children were not allowed take their books home which made it difficult for her "to help them out at home or to teach them something they haven't grasped in school on that day".

Mothers and those with children in the more junior classes were more likely to look at copies and workbooks on a daily basis. While over three-quarters of mothers (79% N=169) looked at their children's copybooks every day, only half of the fathers (50% N=11) did. The numbers who examined copies and workbooks decreased steadily as children went up the school (Table1.27).

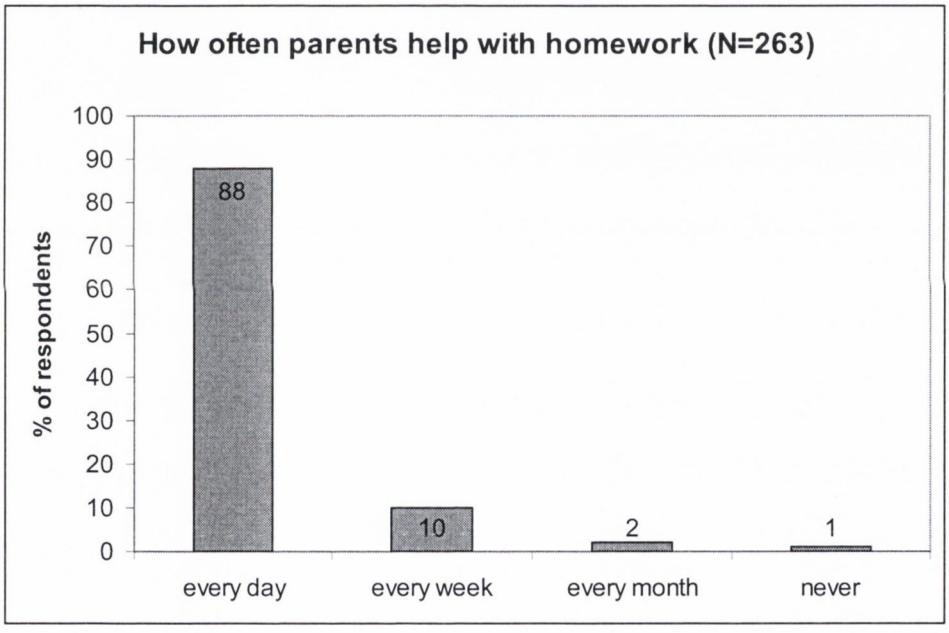
Table 1.27
The difference the class the respondents' children were in made on the frequency with which they looked at their children's copybooks and workbooks

Variable	Every day		Every week		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
6th class	40	**58**	29	**42**	69	**100**
4th class	39	**72**	15	**28**	54	**100**
2nd class	65	**83**	13	**17**	78	**100**
Senior Infants	46	**96**	2	**4**	48	**100**
Total	190	**76**	59	**24**	249	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05

Most respondents helped their children with homework daily (Figure 1.17).

Figure 1.17



Several variables influenced the frequency with which respondents helped with homework. Mothers (93% N=202) were more likely to help with homework on daily basis than fathers (70% N=16). The class the children were in also influenced whether respondents helped with homework. Children in the higher classes got less help with homework on a daily basis than children in the junior classes. Almost all (96% N=125) of the parents with children in the junior classes helped with homework daily compared with 84% (N=106) of those with children in senior classes. Many parents with children in a senior class wrote on the questionnaire that they only helped with homework when asked by the child.

All of those who were interviewed helped with homework and many explained the structures they had put in place to ensure homework was done and that children got the help they needed.

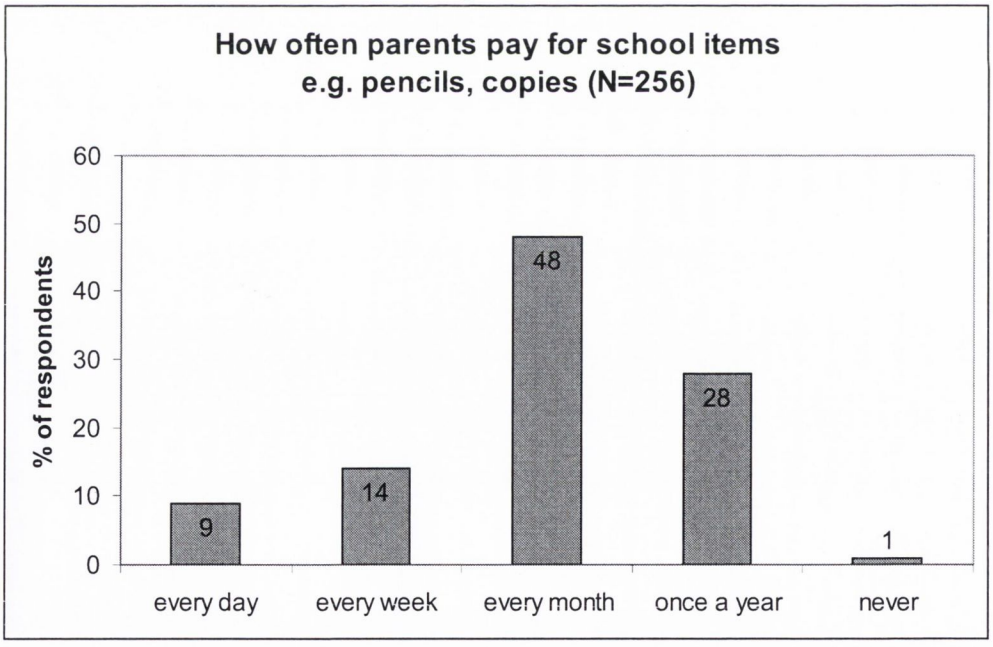
> We always do one-to-one homework. Well the older girl does homework upstairs on her own and I just go up and check it afterwards but the other two, when they are doing it we will use the dining room table so there's no stimulation. It is just one of them and me in that room until they are finished. Then when the older one is finished the next one comes in. I think it is easier for them to concentrate. Then I tell them not to answer the door bell every time it rings and then they do not go out until they've done their homework. (I5MM)

4.7.4 Supporting the school financially

Despite the 'free education' system, parents are expected to pay for various school-related items such as uniforms, books and equipment along with contributing to the school's fundraising efforts. There are also other incidental costs like trips and events that occur during the year.

Nearly all the respondents (99% N=253) paid towards school items, e.g., pencils, copies. However, nearly three-quarters (71% N=182) paid for school items at least once a month (Figure 1.18).

Figure 1.18



School books in my local school cost on average €90 to €100 a year per child (SDLS 2004-05; 2005-06). This does not include dictionaries, table books and atlases, which are used from year to year. School equipment such as pens, pencils, copy books, Pritt sticks were extra. Along with the book list, there was a bill for approximately €65, which covered elocution and dancing classes, photocopying, arts and crafts, book rental

and progress tests. At least another €100, which does not include money contributed towards fundraising, was paid over the school year to cover outings, events and other items (SDLS 2005-06).

The disadvantaged girls' school operate a book rental scheme, which is subsidized by the DES. Parents paid €30 a year to cover school books, pencils, copies, photocopying, art and craft and kindergarten materials (SDDG 2005-06). They also pay 70c a week for dancing lessons and €10 for ten swimming lessons.

Despite the book rental scheme, respondents in the disadvantaged schools felt that they paid for school items more frequently than those in the middle class schools (Table1.28). It may be that middle class parents are expected to pay the total amount at the beginning of the year, while disadvantaged parents pay in instalments throughout the year. For example, the disadvantaged girls' school charged Irish dancing classes weekly, while my local school asked parents for this money at the start of the year.

Table 1.28
Differences between the perceptions of respondents from disadvantaged and middle class schools on how often they paid for school items, e.g., pencils, copies (N=253)

Variable	Weekly		Every month		Once a year		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Disadvantaged schools	31	**33**	42	**45**	20	**22**	93	**100**
Middle class schools	27	**17**	82	**51**	51	**32**	160	**100**
Total	58	**23**	124	**49**	71	**28**	253	**100**

X^2=.008 p<.05

Seven percent (N=19) of the respondents to the questionnaire commented that uniforms, books and various other school activities had become more expensive over the past six years. It was more difficult to buy second hand books "because [the] curriculum changed nearly every year" (Q156MB4). Those with children in second level would be particularly aware of this as revised editions are produced every three years. My daughter could only use one of her brothers' Junior Certificate books in first year, even though they had just finished their exams. I tried to sell the other books second hand but could not as they were all out of date (FN 26-08-06). One mother (Q70DB2) suggested that "books should be free, whether working or not and given back to the school".

All parents are expected to support the school's fundraising efforts. 95% (N=248) of respondents stated that they gave money towards the school's fundraising events. Interesting, younger respondents and those with only one child were less likely

to contribute financially. 83% (N=35) of those under thirty contributed towards fundraising as compared with 97% (N=211) of those over thirty. Similarly, 84% (N=32) of those with only one child helped the school financially in comparison with 97% (N=213) the larger families.

While there was no difference between middle class and disadvantaged schools in the number of respondents who contributed to fundraising, there were differences in their newsletters as to the frequency of their fundraising and the amount of money raised. The Christmas raffle (€4,500) and school walk (€8,500) appeared to be the two main annual fundraising events for the middle class girls' school (SDMG 2004-06). This money was mainly spent on building repairs. In 2006, they had a once-off major fundraiser and raised €28,000 at a parents' night along with another €1,000 from bag packing in Tesco's supermarket and a non-uniform day. Parents were also encouraged to collect Tesco tokens, for which the school had received four computers and software over the last few years. They were also asked to send in used printer cartridges and old mobile phones, which could be used to reduce their printing bills or get additional Tesco tokens. In addition, the sixth class children fundraise approximately €1,500 to €2,000 annually for various charities. The school also supported Simon (€320), Saint Vincent De Paul society (€320), Operation Christmas Child (over 500 shoeboxes), Dyslexia Association (€428), Trocaire (€3858) and the MSReadathon.

While some fundraising took place in the disadvantaged girls' school, it was not as frequent and did not raise as much money as in the middle class schools (SDDG 2005-06). They included a coffee morning for the Hospice (€349), a Christmas Fair (€1,000) and collection for the Meath Hospice (€671). They also had a raffle (€400), Halloween fancy dress and a fashion show of confirmation and communion outfits (€481). This money went in to school funds.

4.7.5 Summary

Most parents in this research supported the school, both formally and informally. While parents upheld the school rules at home, they also helped their children cope with them. Most felt that they had very little say over the rules.

'Keeping a good eye' on their children's progress was important to most parents. This kept them informed of the curriculum and their children's progress. Some felt that when they approached the school about difficulties their children were experiencing that

they had to fight to ensure that their concerns were addressed. Mothers and parents with children in the junior classes were more likely to support their children's learning.

Parents also supported the school by paying for various school-related items and contributing towards fundraising. Disadvantaged parents appeared to notice these costs more than middle class parents. Younger parents and those with only once child were less likely to contribute to fundraising.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter profiled the research participants as well as focusing on the parental involvement in their children's education at home. It examined the roles and responsibilities of parents along with their hope and fears for their children. These perceptions influenced their decision-making processes especially around the area of school choice. The social capital of the parents and the supports they received were also examined. Finally the home curriculum and the support they give to the school were outlined.

The majority of participants were Irish Catholics. There were differences between the respondents from the middle class and disadvantaged schools. Middle class parents were more likely to be older, have higher education qualifications, in paid employment and two-parent families. While only a minority of fathers responded, they tended to come from the middle class schools. Younger respondents tended to have one-child families and children in the junior classes. These variables influenced the respondents' social capital along with their involvement in the home curriculum and the school.

Most parents felt that they were responsible for their children's development and education. Some perceived areas, such as literacy, numeracy, socialisation and values, as a joint responsibility between home and school. Others, particularly those in disadvantaged schools and with lower levels of education, perceived home and school to have separate, though complementary, responsibilities. While most parents, apart from those in one-parent families, agreed that fathers were responsible for their children's education, there were mixed views on the role of the mother. Respondents from one-parent families, the disadvantaged schools and with lower levels of education tended to hold traditional views. Many felt that the parents' personalities and employment levels influenced their views and practices.

Most parents hoped that their children would do well in school and go on to third level education. The reputation of the school, the approachability of the staff and its location in relation to their home were important influences on their choice of school. They got advice from their family, friends and other parents. Middle class parents had vague fears for their children's futures and were proactive in ensuring that their children's names were down in their chosen second level schools. While, disadvantaged parents had specific fears about the influence of the 'street' on their children, they were less proactive about choosing schools.

Respondents appeared to get support and advice from their family, friends, the class teachers and other parents. Professionals, such as the doctor, Garda etc were not perceived as supportive. Very few accessed parenting talks and classes or were members of a group or organisation outside the school. Most, however, networked informally with other parents. Social class, religion and gender had an influence on their social capital. Those with lower levels of education and in one-parent families appeared to be the most 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002).

The respondents in this research were very active home educators. They read stories, played games and took their children on outings. Most attended church monthly with the Catholic ethos of the school influencing this practice. Family size and the educational stage of their children influenced the frequency of these practices. Most children were involved in a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Social class and their children's gender influenced the frequency and type of activity chosen.

All participants agreed that they needed to support the school at home. They did this by encouraging their children to obey the schools' rules and helping with homework. Participants also monitored their children's progress at school by discussing the school day with them and examining their copies and workbooks. In addition, they bought uniforms and books along with contributing to the schools' fundraising efforts.

Chapter Five Research Findings: The Education System

5.1 Introduction

While Chapter Four focused on the role parents play in their children's education at home, this chapter examines parental involvement in the education system at local level. The variables which affect respondents' participation in their children's school are highlighted.

The first two sections concern partnership and policy at national level. They seek to assess the respondents' 'educational capital', i.e., their knowledge of the education system and the recent legislative and curricular changes. These sections explores parents' views on the roles and responsibilities of the main stakeholders, i.e., the State, the Catholic Church and parents along with their knowledge of the changes in Irish Education, particularly the *Education Act 1998,* the *Education Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1999).

The last three sections focus on home-school partnership at local level. Home-school relationships are explored in section four. Participants' perceptions on their welcome in the schools along with their knowledge of and confidence in the complaint procedures are described. The next section investigates home-school communication. The methods both parents and schools use to communicate with each other are outlined, as is the content of notes sent home by the local school. The amount of information respondents have about their children's learning and school events and activities is also investigated. Finally, the involvement of parents as audiences, volunteers and decision-makers within the school is described along with the reasons why parents do not get involved.

5.2 Partnership at National Level

This section looks at the respondents' awareness of the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders at national level. Their understanding of the function of the State and the DES to provide an education for their children, along with the role of the Catholic Church as the patron and owner of the schools concerned, is examined. While the influence of parents at national level is explored, the National Parents Council Primary (NPCP) is omitted as it was not mentioned by any of the participants.

5.2.1 Role and responsibility of the State

The participants viewed the State as having total responsibility for the education system. In the interviews and focus groups, it was described as having responsibility for inspecting the school, maintaining standards as well as providing funding and 'enough teachers to make sure that the school can be run properly' (I7DM). According to the participants, the State, or perhaps more accurately the DES, also decided the curriculum as taught in the schools and set national policies, which had to be implemented at local level. There was no understanding of the partnership process at national level and the role of the NPCP in representing the views of parents. The middle class father summed up the State's role as follows:

> To provide the infra structure in terms of schools and facilities, to provide the resources in terms of teachers and funding that might be required for any programmes, to provide the curriculum that is appropriate to children and to try and I suppose, particularly at second level, to try and ensure that that curriculum is appropriate to modern Ireland in terms of factoring in technology, environmental issues and issues like that. (I4MF)

Many were dissatisfied with the State and felt that it could be doing more to fulfil its responsibilities.

> I think that the State lets down our children extremely badly. From the moment children are born in this State they are so badly neglected ... from the maternity units to the way children are treated especially children with long-term special needs like my daughter ... simple things that I need ... imagine the school can not provide them as they do not have the resources they say. (I6MM)

Class size was mentioned by 9% (N=23) of the respondents to the questionnaire as one of the changes they had noticed in schools over the last few years. While parents in disadvantage schools noticed that class sizes had decreased, those in middle class schools, especially the girls' school, complained that class sizes were too large. As one respondent wrote

> I strongly feel that classroom sizes are too big and have had to take a very hands (sic) on approach to watching reading and maths levels in my own children. (There is just too many to teach) (Q238MG2)

With expansion of the welfare state, some respondents wished the State to act as a 'good parent' (Pinkney 2000 p.116) or provider and subsidise the costs for parents. Suggestions included providing or at least subsidising extra–curricular activities (I3MM), assessments and any additional help required for homework, e.g., computer aided programmes etc. (Q181MG6). Apart from assessments, these were traditionally considered the responsibility of parents.

4.2.2 Role and Responsibility of the Catholic Church

While acknowledging that the Church owned and was responsible for the operation for the schools, most of those who were interviewed were ambiguous about its role in both education and the school.

> The Church – I suppose. Traditionally they had a big - like isn't there one in the Board of Management in these schools anyway? .....
>
> *They own the school*
>
> Do they own this one?
>
> Yeah, the [religious order] own this one ...
>
> Well I do not think they have any influence, do they? I do not think they have much of an influence in this school
>
> Well this school maybe not but [the middle class girls'] school now, they probably have more of an influence, because they are near the Church and they are always popping in and out there (FG2M)

However, most respondents to the questionnaire (73% N=192) agreed that the Catholic values of the school were very important. For three (I5MM; I2DM; I7DM) of the parents interviewed it was a determining factor when choosing a school. While one emphasised that it was part of the commitment made by the parents at baptism (I2DM), another (I5MM) felt that the Catholic ethos positively influenced the children to "be involved, look outside themselves, to be a bit more forward looking and less selfish". Others had mixed views. Once the children received a religious education and access to the sacraments, as one respondent (I4MF) stated, the Catholic ethos of the school did not really matter. Those that brought their children to Church more frequently were more likely to feel strongly that the Catholic values of the school were important (Table 1.29)

Table 1.29
The connection between the frequency of the respondents' attendance at church and their views that the Catholic values of the school were important

Variable	Strongly Agree		Agree		Do not agree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Weekly	43	**41**	45	**43**	17	**16**	105	**100**
Once a month	13	**18**	45	**61**	16	**22**	74	**101***
Less frequently	9	**13**	28	**42**	30	**45**	67	**100**
Total	65	**26**	118	**48**	63	**26**	246	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05
* Result of rounding whole numbers

The involvement of the local clergy in visiting the schools, teaching children about God (I2DM) and preparing them for the sacraments was highlighted and

welcomed by many. However, it was acknowledged that the connection between schools and Church had weakened over the years.

> I can give you an example of that in the sense that today the Church seems to operate on a separate basis. There's the family mass on Sunday, the family mass procession, Good Friday, in the Church, you know, all those feast days. There is never anything from the school. That's done separately to a parish group. Like I would never get a note home from [my child] saying that the parish mass is, the family mass is at 10.30 next Sunday, the procession will be - would your child like to go – you never get that. It is up to you to go and join the family mass group so that you can participate. It is not like down the country years ago, or even here years ago where, they would automatically assume, if they were in the Communion class, they'd be in the Holy Communion procession. That doesn't happen anymore (FG2M)

However, some were unhappy with the Catholic ethos. The recent Church scandals, their own lack of faith along with the changes in society made respondents question the Church's involvement in schools. Two felt strongly that the days of denominational education were over and that there should be clear demarcation lines between Church and State.

> I do not think seriously that the Church has a place in education. I do not think that because of their inability to actually deal with it [child abuse] and confront it they deserve a place is how I would see it... and I think that a lot of – so many parents really do not feel part of the, I think, the sort of current Church, if you want to put it like that.
> I also think that having a totally Catholic ethos is unfortunate especially again in a school like this ... where you see ... children from lots of different back grounds now and different ethnic origins and they are not all Catholics. (I6MM)

5.2.3 Influence of Parents at National Level

When asked what parents could do to ensure that the State and Church met children's educational needs, most participants felt that they had very little influence. Nobody mentioned the role of the NPCP in negotiating partnership agreements and national educational policy and there was little confidence that parents' views would be listened to and acted on.

> Shout loudly. In some sense, what can you do? I mean, being a civil servant, knowing the way the system works – a lot and probably very little. I know they can sort of agitate, they can try and get together via the parents' councils, or whatever, either at local or national level, you know, in terms of making representations to Departments and local politicians and what not - .... in terms of whether parents can actually get more resources for schools or what I doubt that very much. Having said that look at the success that the parents in Inchicore had last week with the Christian Brothers and in keeping the school open for a year, you know. I suppose it does show the people power to some extent. In terms of the Church, well I suppose depending again locally, whether there is sort of openness to or whether people having voices. Now there are all these Pastoral Councils and things so there is sort of facility for people sort of to have their voices heard. Now to what extent the Church will act on it or can act on it or have the resources to act on it I do not know ... (I4MF)

Another gave an example of how parents had tried to stop the closing of a local swimming pool and failed.

> I suppose if it's things for the children that you would get out and get involved. Like when they were trying to save the swimming pool, the likes of everyone got out and tried to stop them closing the pool .....but it didn't work
> *Why do you think it didn't work?*
> Because I think that the whole place is being taken over by private companies to be honest and they are not leaving anything for kids. (I7DM)

5.2.4 Summary

This section looked at the role of the State and the Catholic Church at national level. Participants' views on the influence of parents on the stakeholders at national level were also explored.

There was no understanding of the partnership process at national level among the participants. While parents were very aware of the role of the State, they felt that it was not meeting its commitment to their children.

Most respondents were ambiguous about the role of the Church in both education and the school. Most felt that the Catholic values of the school were very important. The work done by the religious at local level was warmly acknowledged. However, some respondents felt that in today's society, particularly in the light of the recent scandals, that the Church had no role in children's education.

It was felt that parents had very little influence on decisions made by the State and the Church. Nobody mentioned the role of the NPCP in negotiating partnership agreements and national educational policy.

5.3 Educational Capital at National Level

Irish education has undergone a period of immense change over the last decade. Sixty-six percent (N=175) of questionnaire respondents mentioned the various changes that they had noticed over the last six years (Table 1.30). These included changes to the curriculum, attitudes towards parents and in-service days. Many of these changes are the result of the implementation of the *Education Act 1998, Education Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1998). Respondents' educational capital or their knowledge of the national policy decisions, which impact most directly on their children's education, will be examined in this section.

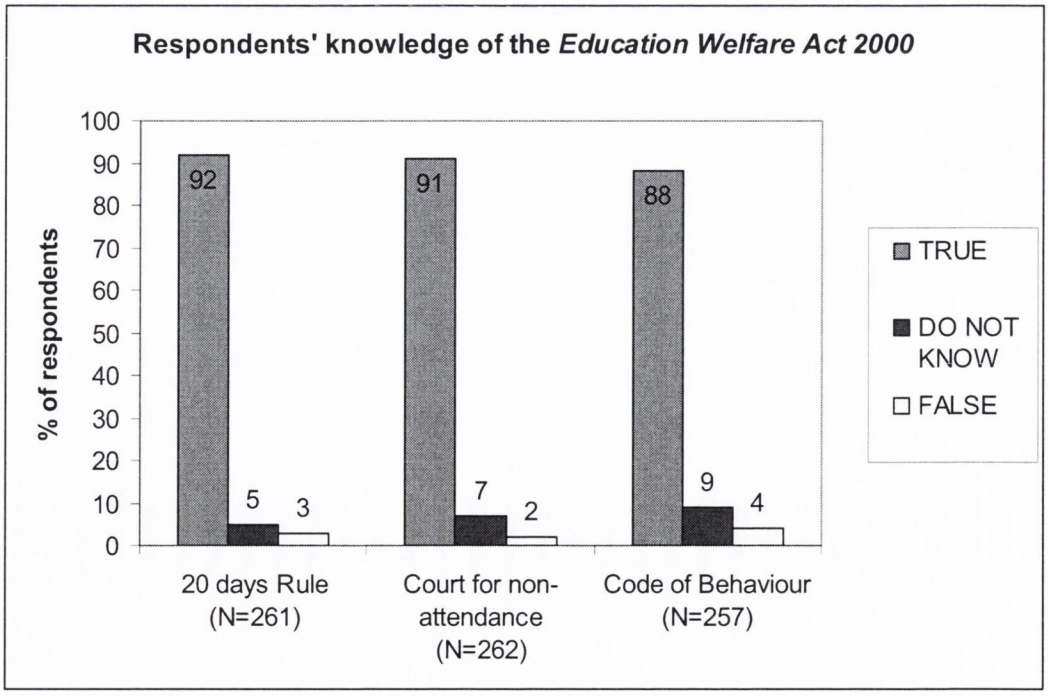
Table 1.30
Changes noticed by parents in schools over the last six years

	N	%
Changes in the curriculum	62	**24**
Positive attitude to parents	54	**21**
In-service days and holidays	43	**16**
Changes in children's behaviour	43	**16**
Changes in teachers' attitudes and approaches	34	**13**
Improvement to the buildings	33	**13**
Additional activities and programmes	25	**10**
Size of classes	23	**9**
More international pupils	22	**8**
More expensive	19	**7**
Introduction of healthy lunch policies	17	**6**
Changes in rules for attendance	16	**6**
Support or lack of support for children with special needs	11	**4**
Other e.g. homework	9	**3**

5.3.1 *Education Welfare Act 2000*

Parents appeared to be very aware of the implications of the *Education Welfare Act 2000* (Figure 1.19), which obliges them to send their children to school.

Figure 1.19

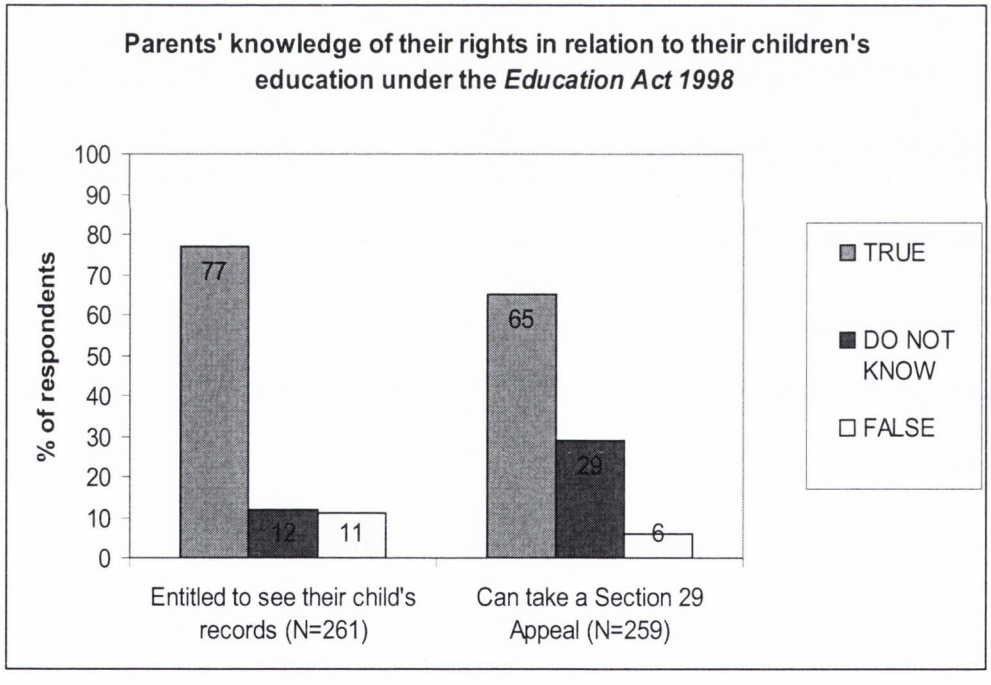


The vast majority (91% N=238) knew that parents could be taken to court if their child did not attend school. They (92% N=240) were also informed about the twenty day rule. If their children missed twenty days in a full school year, respondents knew that the school would report them to the Education Welfare Officer (EWO). In addition, 88% (N=226) were aware that they were entitled to a copy of the schools' Code of Behaviour. In the light of this figure, it is interesting that only 61% (N=159) of respondents stated that they had a copy of the school rules and/or Code of Behaviour.

5.3.2 *Education Act 1998*

Parents were less knowledgeable about their rights under the *Education Act 1998* (Figure 1.20). Only 77% (N=202) of respondents to the questionnaire knew that they were entitled to their children's school records, while even less (65% N=168) knew that they could take a Section 29 appeal to the DES if a school refuses to enrol their child.

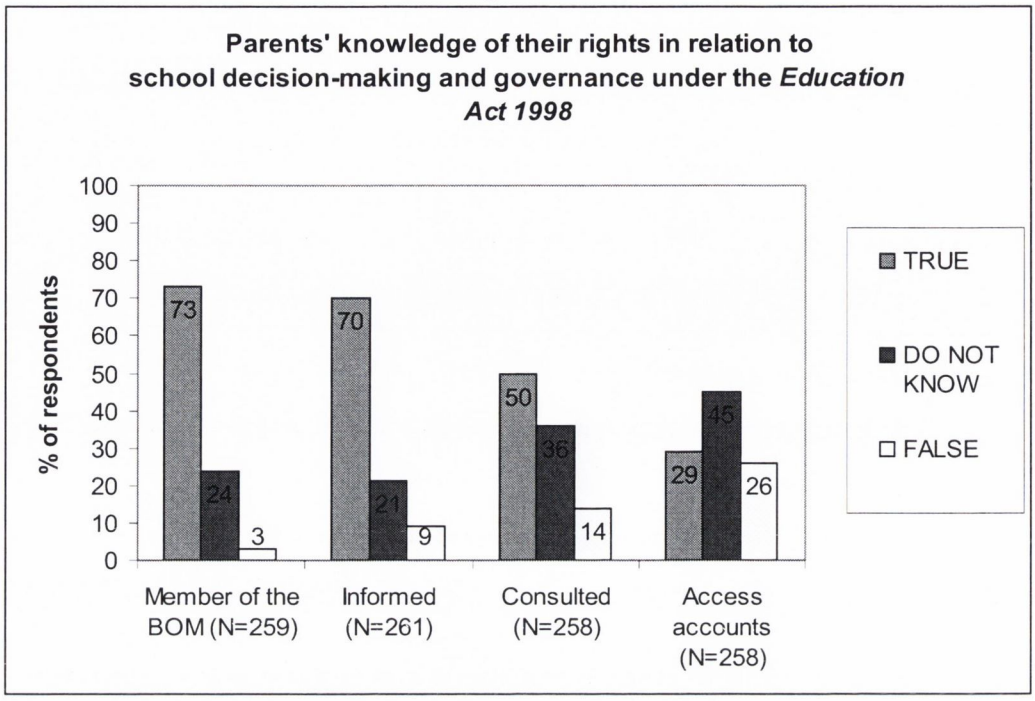
Figure 1.20



Parents' knowledge of their right to be involved in the schools' decision making and governance under the *Education Act* 1998 was also limited (Figure 1.21). While three-quarters (73% N=188) of respondents to the questionnaire knew that there were parents on the Board of Management (BOM), over a quarter (27% N=71) were unaware of the fact. As one parent who was interviewed said

> As I have said before, they need to communicate an awful lot more, even you know like that, the Board of the school the way it is. Is there a parent on it? (I2DM)

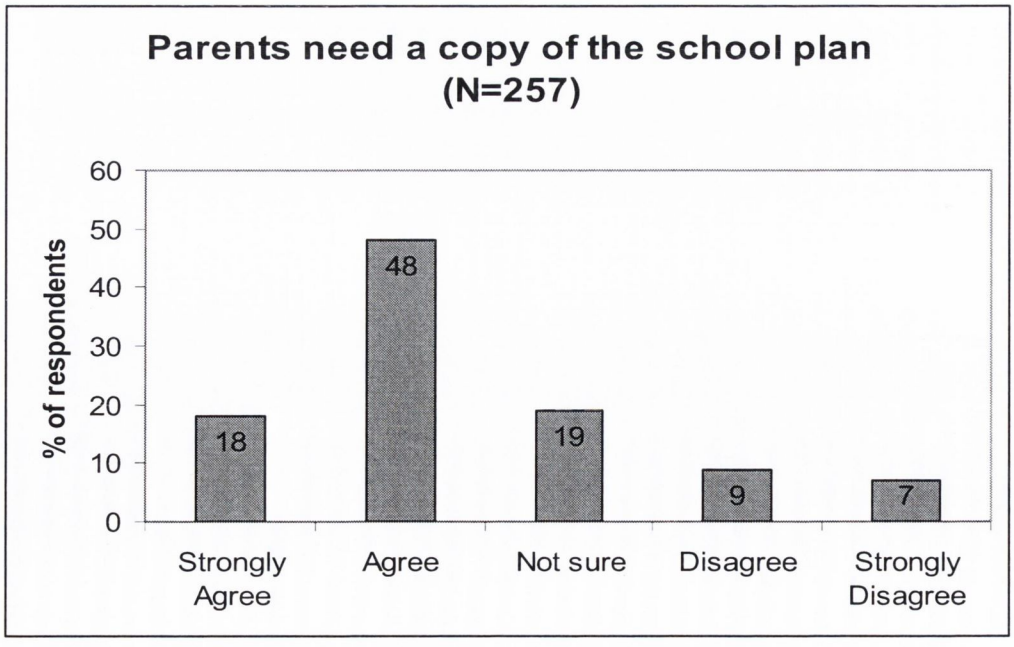
Figure 1.21



There was a similar pattern with respondents' knowledge of the BOM's obligation to keep parents informed of school matters. Even less knew that they had the right to be consulted on school policies (50% N=130) and to see the school's financial accounts (29% N=75).

Under the *Education Act 1998,* parents are entitled to a copy of the school plan, which includes both organisational policies and curriculum plans. Over half (65% N=168) the respondents agreed that they needed a copy of the school plan (Figure 1.22).

Figure 1.22



5.3.3 *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a)

Whatever about their knowledge of the primary school curriculum, parents appeared to be very aware of the number of curriculum in-service days, for which the school is closed. Sixteen percent (N=43) of respondents mentioned them as one of the changes they had noticed over the past six years. Most agreed with following respondent who wrote:

> Too many half-days, days off, Inservice days, they seem to happen just before or after mid terms, bank holidays weekends etc. Why?? As this week has shown, they are only back after a full week off and they are off again today 24/2/06. After Xmas they returned to school for 2½ days out of 5. Ridiculous. My daughter started school in Sep '00 and there has been inservice days (sic) since then. How many years are they going on for!! (Q201MG4)

Twenty-four percent (N=62) of respondents mentioned that they had noticed changes to the curriculum over the last six years. There was mixed opinions on the curriculum. Positive comments included

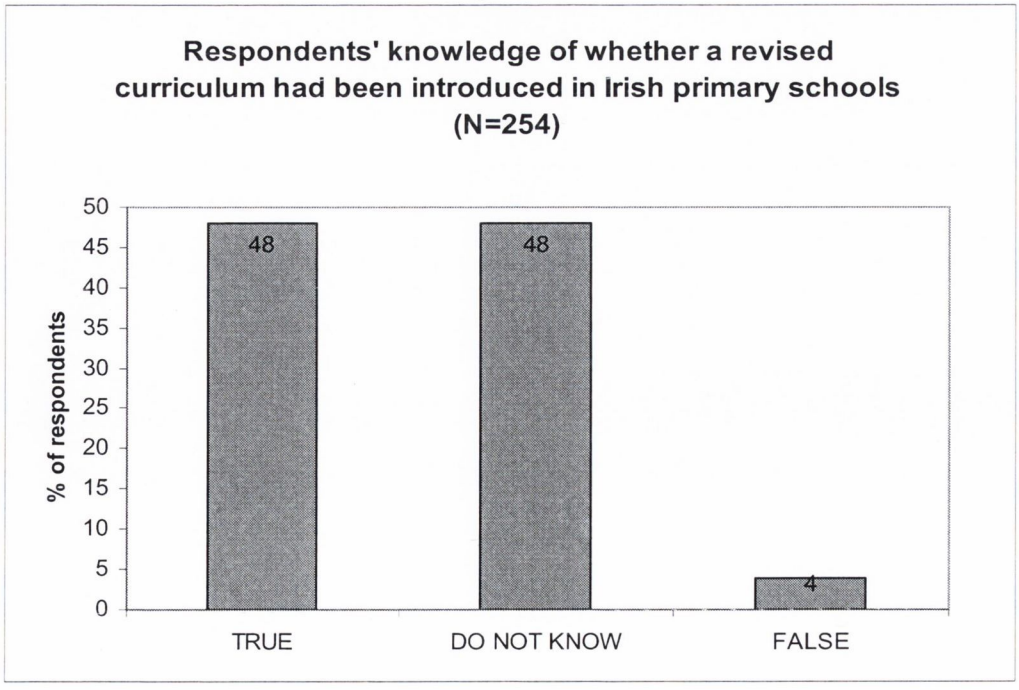
> Less concentration on rote learning
> More oral work/self expression in classes e.g. drama
> Excellent history, geography/science introduction in 3rd/4th class (Q129MB4)

Others were not as convinced of the benefits of the revised curriculum.

> - lack of learning times tables → less numerate students
> - alternative means of addition inappropriate (has it been tested) (Q169MBSI)

Despite the level of awareness of curricular changes and the in-service days, slightly less than half (48% N=123) the respondents knew that a revised curriculum had been introduced in Irish primary schools (Figure 1.23).

Figure 1.23



In the interviews and focus groups most parents had little knowledge of the curriculum.

> I do not really know. Ok from doing her homework it is obvious what she does in terms of reading, writing and maths and Irish but in terms of what else they do. For instance I was surprised last year, when … at the end of the year she came back laden down with all sorts of books. I was surprised at what she was actually doing, you know, it was so sort of advanced and so broad and what not. I hadn't really a sense of what the curriculum was. Now whether that is a good thing or a bad thing. I am quite happy that the curriculum is good and I am quite happy to leave it to the teachers but you know it mightn't be any harm if parents knew that. (I4MF)

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a new subject introduced with the revised curriculum. It is the one subject on which parents are supposed to be consulted (DES 1999e; 2002a; 2003b) but from this conversation it is obvious that some of the parents' knowledge of it was sketchy.

> When the children are being taught like SPHE
>
> SPHE – what's that?
>
> It is sex education or something
>
> Sex education and drugs education I think S stands for, I do not know ……
>
> Is it sixth class that they do that in, is it?
>
> No, third class up ……..
>
> It is going to tell you all about sex ……..
>
> Is that to do with the leaflet in first and high babies about keeping yourself safe? .....
>
> It is all them brochures and things that comes home over the years
>
> It is very good because it helps you along if she has questions. They know a bit already and you know what to give them (FG1D)

5.3.4 Influences on Educational Capital

Certain variables influenced the educational capital of the respondents. These include the social class, education and age of the respondent along with the educational stage their children were at.

Parents with children in the middle class schools were more likely to know about their rights under the *Education Act 1998*. 81% (N=136) of middle class respondents knew that there were parents on the BOM as compared to just over half of the disadvantaged respondents (57% N=55). Similarly, 36% (N=58) of middle class parents knew that they were entitled to see the school's financial accounts as opposed to only 18% (N=17) of the disadvantaged respondents. They were also more aware of the introduction of the revised curriculum and the associated in-service days. A fifth of middle class parents (21% N=35) commented on the number of days the children had off as compared to only 8% (N=8) of those in the disadvantaged schools. Parents who had

children attending the middle class girls' school were far more aware of the introduction of the revised curriculum than those from other schools (Table 1.31).

Table 1.31
The differences between the respondents from the four schools on their knowledge of the introduction of the revised curriculum

Variable	True		Do not know		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Middle class girls' school	60	**72**	23	**28**	83	**100**
Middle class boys' school	37	**47**	42	**53**	79	**100**
Disadvantaged boys' school	18	**33**	36	**67**	54	**100**
Disadvantaged girls' school	8	**21**	30	**79**	38	**100**
Total	123	**48**	131	**52**	254	**101***

X^2=.000 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

As would be expected, those with higher qualifications appeared to have more knowledge of the system. Forty-three percent (N=26) of those with third level qualifications knew that parents were allowed see the school's financial accounts compared to 24% (N=45) of those without third level qualifications. Similarly 87% (N=53) of respondents with third level qualifications knew that parents were represented on a school's BOM as compared to 68% (N=129) of those without third level qualifications. Moreover, educational qualifications also influenced respondents' knowledge of their right to see their children's records (Table 1.32).

Table 1.32
Influence of the respondents' level of education on their knowledge of their entitlement to their children's school records

Variable	True		Either do not know or false		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary level qualification	11	**50**	11	**50**	22	**100**
Second level qualification	130	**77**	39	**23**	169	**100**
Third level qualification	52	**85**	9	**15**	61	**100**
Total	193	**77**	59	**23**	252	**100**

X^2=.003 p<.05

In contrast, 96% (N=21) of those who had primary education knew that the BOM must keep parents informed of school matters as compared with 67% (N=156) of those with a higher level of education. Interestingly, they were also less likely to agree that they needed a copy of the school plan. Only 35% (N=7) of those with a primary

education felt that parents needed a copy of the school plan in contrast with 68% (N=152) of those with higher levels of education.

The educational capital of respondents with older children appeared to be higher. Over three-quarters (83% N=71) of parents with children in secondary school knew that there were parents on the BOM as compared to 68% (N=116) of those with no children at second level. Likewise, 40% (N=34) of those with children attending secondary school knew that they were entitled to see the school's financial accounts in contrast with 24% (N=41) of those without children in secondary school. Parents of older children were also more likely to know that a revised curriculum had been introduced. Approximately three fifths of those with children in the senior classes (61% N=79) and in second level (60% N=52) were aware of the changes as compared to over two fifths of those with children in the junior classes (42% N=56) and not attending second level schools (47% N=79). It appears that the longer parents are in the education system the more educational capital they acquire.

Of course, those with older children were more likely to be older themselves. Three-quarters of those over thirty (77% N=170) knew that there were parents on the BOM compared with only 48% (N=20) of respondents under thirty. Similarly, 32% (N=69) of those over thirty knew that they were entitled to see the school's financial accounts as opposed to only 12% (N=5) of those under thirty. There was also a noticeable difference between the age of the respondents and their knowledge about the curriculum changes (Table 1.33).

Table 1.33
The influence of the age of the respondent and their knowledge that a revised curriculum had been introduced in Irish primary schools

Variable	True		Do not know		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Aged under thirty	6	**15**	34	**85**	40	**100**
Aged between thirty and thirty-nine	47	**43**	63	**57**	110	**100**
Aged forty and over	69	**68**	33	**32**	102	**100**
Total	122	**48**	130	**52**	252	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05

5.3.5 Summary

Over the past six years, participants had noticed changes in both the curriculum and the schools' attitude to parents. While they were very aware of the implications of the *Education Welfare Act 2000* in relation attendance, they were less knowledgeable

about their rights under the *Education Act 1998* and the introduction of the revised curriculum. Middle class parents and those with higher educational qualifications were more aware of these changes. The longer the respondents' children were in the system the more knowledge they had. Older parents with children either in the senior classes and/or secondary school were more likely to be aware of their rights and the introduction of the revised curriculum.

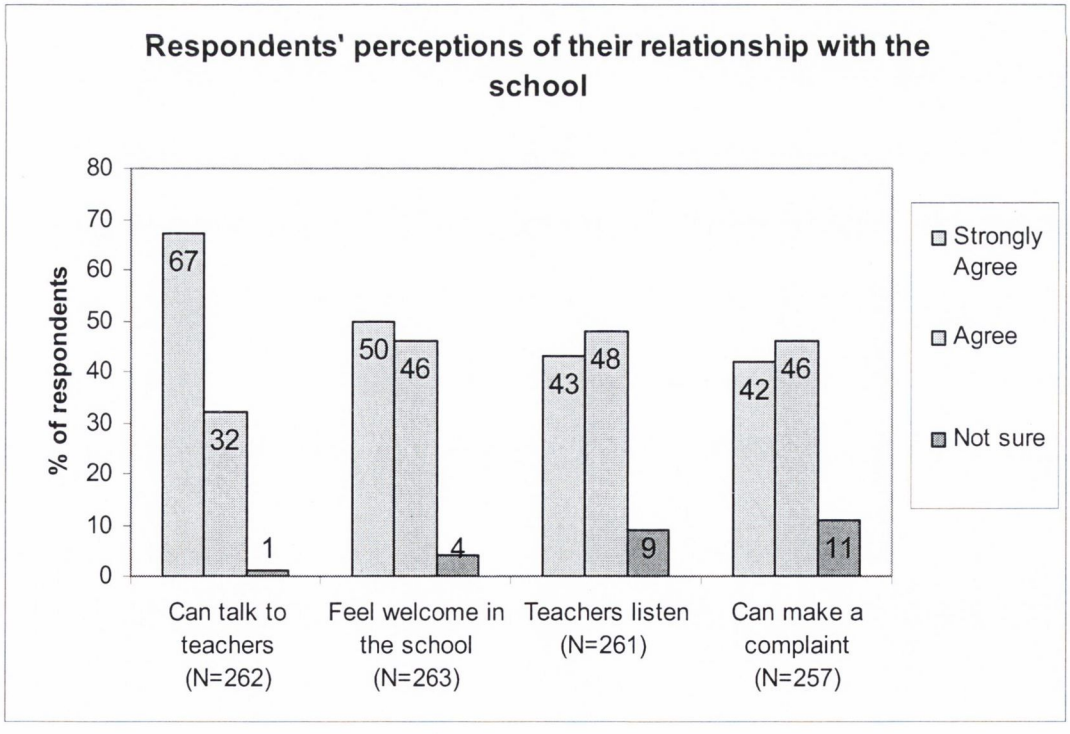
5.4 Home-School Relationships

This section examines the relationship between the research participants and the schools their children were attending. It investigates the welcome they receive and how comfortable they feel about complaining. The variables which influence the relationship between home and school are also explored.

5.4.1 Relationship with the school

The vast majority of questionnaire respondents (96% N=252) agreed that they felt welcome in their children's schools (Figure 1.24).

Figure 1.24



As one interviewee said

> I know that if I needed to see any of the teachers there wouldn't be any difficulty in organising that. That's just a feeling I get from them that they are amenable to it – it is a whole school kind of ethos thing. (I5MM)

In addition, 21% (N=54) of the respondents to the questionnaires mentioned that they had noticed a change in the home-school relationship over the last six years. Teachers had become easier to talk to (Q37DB2), 'more approachable' (Q172MG6) and there was 'better communication between schools and parents' (Q199MG4). As one respondent to the questionnaire wrote

1. Increased parental involvement in school matters.
2. Parents are actively encouraged by the school ethos to be more involved in their children's education – reading, homework, sport, etc.
3. Greater sharing of information between schools and parents (Q250MGSI)

The 'approachability' of a school was very important to parents and they felt that

> You should be made to feel that you can walk in at any time –
> Ring up to say that you are on your way or you are coming in or even out in the yard..... I know here, at half one, half two, you can just come in to the yard and the head teacher is always there and you can just go up with any problem. I know of some other schools where you have to ring, you have to make an appointment and you might get your appointment. (FG2M)

Most respondents had met the principal (96% N=252) and their child's teacher (99% N=260). They felt that they could talk to the teacher (99% N=260) and that teachers listened to them (91% N=237) (Figure 1.24 p.155). It was interesting that more strongly agreed that they could talk to the teacher (67% N=177), than strongly agreed that teachers listened to them (43% N=112).

Most parents were very aware of and sympathetic to the difficulties experienced by teachers and the increasing demands placed on them by the changes in society.

> I think teachers do what they have to do extremely well, sometimes under extremely difficult circumstances, with a lot of overcrowding and children with all sorts of problems ..... but my experience of the teaching, the teachers my children have had, they have all been fantastic. (I4MM)

> There are huge demands being made on teachers now to be up-to-date as regards any health issues. ADHD is a huge thing. Whereas years ago children were bold but now-a-days everybody seems to have ADHD and they have special problems and I am sure that there is a huge book that every teacher has to read about an ADHD child .....
>
> Oh, I think, I think a teacher has to be just so aware of all social issues now and then like sure every second child at the back of your class probably won't speak English if you've got junior or senior infants, so you have that to contend with as well. (FG2M)

The middle class father suggested that parents added to these pressures as they were much more inclined to question teachers today than they were in the past. He felt that

> Between you and me it sort of gone too far, because from friends of mine who are teachers you get parents that, you know, are beating down their door, you know, complaining about everything. (I4MF)

Most respondents (88% N=228) felt that they could make a complaint in the school (Figure 1.24 p.155). However, prior to approaching the school, the interviewees

said that they would discuss the issue with their child and see if there was anything they could do at home to help. One person felt that if a child had problems it was just as frustrating for the teacher as for the parents and that both needed to work together to help the child (I6MM). It appears that parents try to deal with problems diplomatically, starting at the lowest level possible.

> First of all I would ask her about it, you know, say to her what's wrong. If there was a problem, I'd go straight up to her teacher the next morning and speak to her teacher.
> *And what happens then, if it didn't solve it?*
> I'd talk to the principal and if that didn't work and nothing was done about it I'd go to the Board of Education about it and complain. (I2DM)

However, some parents, particularly if they were unsure of their rights, preferred to contact the DES before the school. They rang the DES

> If they weren't sure about what the school's policy was. If there was something happening at the school that they were not happy about and they needed to find out what is supposed to happen in these particular circumstances. (FG2M)

However, one middle class mother felt very uneasy talking to teachers.

> I have - I am going to tell you now - the idea of walking in to a teacher, in to a principal or anything - I hate parent teacher meetings
> *Really?*
> Oh yeah, I am shot back 20 years – Oh Christ I hate them
> *Yeah?*
> Oh yeah! Dreadful I think its – *laughing* - past experience coming back on me. I do not know – *laughing* - You know these parent-teacher meetings I never feel very comfortable at them. I'm hanging on the edge. (I3MM)

She had approached a teacher about her child and felt that her concerns were not listened to or acted on.

> I had a terrible phobia about [my child] not mixing so well and I went to the teacher in the school yard about it and it was kind of 'ah no I'll keep an eye on her, it is grand' and then I went back again a few months later and it was the same. I actually felt that she hadn't really paid attention to me, to be honest with you – that kind of thing. I know she probably felt that I was getting worked up about nothing but she [her child] was exceptionally shy at the time and I did feel that I was kind of bothering the teacher, she was busy and I felt like a bit of an idiot then. 'Oh my God she thinks I'm stupid'. It was a bit of a missing link. (I3MM)

She felt she would try to help her child at home rather than complaining to the teacher.

> Oh God, I do not know …… rather than approach the school, I think I would be more inclined to sit down and help them myself, teach them myself. I'd feel I wasn't qualified nearly to go up and say - because I know a girl, her little one had a huge amount of homework. She challenged the teacher and the teacher told her 'Well, you know, she's in third class now and she has to expect this homework' and she just felt that she's not able for it. It is too much but she got nowhere with it……. she was told sorry she had to learn it whether she likes it or not. So I think that is where I am coming from. Even if you did go up you wouldn't get anywhere. (I3MM)

Others felt that their concerns about their children were not taken seriously and that they had to put a lot of pressure on the school before they would act. One parent who was interviewed described her experience as follows:

My child, for three years I asked for an assessment report to be made out, this is the truth. All my children have gone to the school, I choose the school, it is a school that done them good so it is not a big knock down, I was three years and she couldn't read and I really mean that right. She was going in to third class at this stage, how many is that four years or whatever, and I said, 'I need an assessment done on her. Can I have the psychologist, you know the educational psychologist?' Because she's passing her sigma and micra tests, ok, she was barely passing them, she couldn't get, she wasn't eligible for these, she wasn't good enough to go on for this, so I was stuck in the middle. It was like you are going to have this child who is like, not great, and below par but not enough below the par to so she is going to go through school left in the class and then goes to secondary school and by second year the child leaves school, because she has no interest. So I had a fight and I asked to pay for the psychologist report myself because the report has to be paid for. The Board of Education pays for two and school board pays for another two and that's it. I'd have paid for it myself but thanks to them I didn't have to pay for it. They got it done a week later. I was told she had ADHD, which I knew she had, right and I'd been telling them three years she had and she'd have got her resource hours, for three years. It was terrible hard, it really was and now she is getting all the support she needs and I mean all the support she needs. She has her resource hours and she has come on like, she's nearly at her age for reading now. That's needn't have been the case. You have to really fight. (FG1D)

5.4.2 Factors which influence the home-school relationship

Some of the factors which influenced the respondents' relationship with the school were unexpected. Apart from gender, the respondents' personal characteristics and/or the school their children attended had no bearing on their relationship with the school. Home-school communication and parental involvement in both the home curriculum and the school were more significant factors.

Mothers appeared to be more actively engaged in establishing and maintaining a relationship with the school. They tended to talk to the teachers more frequently. Over a quarter (27% N=55) spoke to the teachers at least once a week as compared with 10% (N=2) fathers. They were more likely to have met the principal (Table 1.34). However, there were no significant gender differences in the perceptions of the questionnaire respondents on their relationship with the school. Fathers felt just as welcome as mothers.

Table 1.34
Gender differences in having met the principal

Variable	Yes		No		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Mother	218	**97**	6	**3**	224	**100**
Father	19	**79**	5	**21**	24	**100**
Total	237	**96**	11	**4**	248	**100**

X^2=.002 p<.02

There were gender differences between interviewees when defining the teachers' role. The mothers were vague as to what the teachers' role was, with one woman going as far to say, "I do not think I have any role on saying what teachers should do" (I6MM).

While emphasising how great the teachers were and the positive part they played in their children's lives, they described teachers as educating, disciplining, teaching and giving children the "facts". One mother acknowledged how teachers had supported her and her children emotionally in time of crisis.

> Teachers, one would be discipline, two would be to educate them but to me I find that, over the years, with the teachers my kids had, they were kind of counsellors too. Like my kids had a lot of trouble when their father left, when me (sic) mother died and me father died and I found great support from the teachers through all that. They have a bigger job than just teaching, you know. (I8DM)

The men, on the other hand were very explicit about the teachers' role. They saw it as teaching children to "read, write, learn" (I1DGF). The middle class father also saw the development of qualities which support children's learning as being important.

> In terms of typical order - right at the very start in terms of playschool try and get the kids used to – giving them a little bit of independence, helping them to develop as little individuals and then moving through sort of primary level and trying to put some structure on the kids' day and on the kids' approach to any activities and then obviously the mechanics of reading and writing and just giving them a general education in terms of nature, the environment, science and whatever else. I think changing then at second level to trying to get, rather than simply spoon feeding and giving young adults - trying to develop in them a responsibility - their own responsibility and trying to give them a questioning nature and trying to facilitate their learning rather pushing it on them, setting the agenda, trying to trying to facilitate the students so that they are eager to learn and they are setting the agenda to an extent. (I4MF)

Communication was an important element in the development of positive home-school relationships. Not surprisingly, the more the respondents talked to their child's teacher the more they felt that they were listened to (Table 1.35). They also tended to feel more comfortable about making a complaint. Over half (59% N=37) of those who spoke to the teacher daily strongly agreed that they could make a complaint in comparison with 35% (N=61) of those who spoke to the teacher less frequently.

Table 1.35
Influence of the frequency with which the respondents spoke to their child's teacher and their perception on whether teachers listened to them

Variable: Spoke to the teacher	**Strongly agree that the teacher listened to them**		**Agreed that the teacher listened to them**		**Disagreed that the teacher listened to them**		**Total**	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
once a week	35	**56**	27	**43**	1	**2**	63	**101***
once a month	42	**42**	48	**48**	10	**10**	100	**100**
once a year or never	26	**34**	40	**53**	10	**13**	76	**100**
Total	103	**43**	115	**48**	21	**9**	239	**100**

X^2=.042 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Even written communication has an impact of parents' perceptions of their relationship with their children's teacher (Table 1.36). Over half (53% N=58) of those who read notes daily strongly agreed that they were listened to by the teachers as opposed to 36% (N=49) of those who read notes weekly or monthly. Similarly respondents who read the notes sent home on daily basis were more likely to strongly agree that they could make a complaint.

Table 1.36
Influence of the frequency with which the respondents read notes sent home by the school and their perception on whether they could make a complaint

Variable: Read notes	**Strongly agree that they could make a complaint**		**Agree that they could make a complaint**		**Do not agree that they could make a complaint**		**Total**	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
once a week	60	**55**	38	**35**	11	**10**	109	**100**
once a month	32	**34**	47	**51**	14	**15**	93	**100**
once a year or never	12	**28**	26	**61**	5	**12**	43	**101***
Total	104	**42**	111	**45**	30	**12**	245	**99***

X^2=.007 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Support for the ethos of the school along with parental involvement in certain aspects of the home curriculum and in the school tended to influence their relationship with the school. Those who strongly agreed that the Catholic values of the school was important also strongly agreed that teachers listened to them (Table 1.37). Similarly, 58% (N=39) of those who strongly agreed with the ethos of the school felt that they could make a complaint as compared with 36% (N=69) of those who did not strongly agree.

Table 1.37
Relationship between agreement with Catholic values of the school and the respondents' perception that the teachers listened to them

Variable:	**Strongly agree that teachers listen to me**		**Agree that teachers listen to me**		**Do not agree that teachers listen to me**		**Total**	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Strongly agree with the Catholic values	41	**61**	22	**33**	4	**6**	67	**100**
Agree with the Catholic values	49	**40**	65	**53**	9	**7**	123	**100**
Do not agree with the Catholic values	22	**31**	36	**51**	12	**17**	70	**99***
Total	112	**43**	123	**47**	25	**10**	260	**100**

X^2=.002 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Those who attended church weekly were more likely to strongly agree that the teachers listened to them (Table 1.38). Similarly, 51% (N=53) of weekly attendees felt strongly that they could complain as opposed to 36% (N=50) of those who attended less frequently.

Table 1.38
Relationship between attendance at church and the respondents' perception that the teachers listened to them

Variable: Attend Church	Strongly agree that teachers listen to me		Agree that teachers listen to me		Disagree that teachers listen to me		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Once a week	56	**53**	43	**41**	6	**6**	105	**100**
Once a month	30	**41**	37	**51**	6	**8**	73	**100**
Once a year or never	20	**29**	37	**54**	11	**16**	68	**99***
Total	106	**43**	117	**48**	23	**9**	246	**100**

X^2=.015 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Respondents who checked their children's copies daily also had a stronger sense that teachers listened to them. Half (50% N=94) of those who looked at their children's copies and workbooks daily strongly agreed that teachers listened to them in comparison with only a quarter (24% N=14) of those who looked at them weekly. Likewise 48% (N=90) of those examined their children's copies daily felt strongly that they could make a complaint as compared with a quarter (29% N=17) of those who examined them weekly.

In addition, 56% (N=40) of those that helped out in the school strongly agreed that the teachers listened to them as opposed to 38% (N=70) of those that did not help out. Similarly, 'helpers' felt more comfortable about making a complaint (Table 1.39).

Table 1.39
The relationship between helping out in the school and perceptions on making a complaint

Variable	Strongly agreed that they could make a complaint		Agreed that they could make a complaint		Disagreed that they could make a complaint		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Helped out in the school	43	**61**	23	**32**	5	**7**	71	**100**
Did not help out in the school	64	**34**	96	**52**	26	**14**	186	**100**
Total	107	**42**	119	**46**	31	**12**	257	**100**

X^2=.001 p<.05

5.4.3 Summary

Respondents in this research appeared to have a very good relationship with their children's schools. Not only did they feel welcome but they had noticed a positive change in attitude towards parents over the last six years. Practically everyone had met the principal and their children's teachers and felt that they were listened to. Most respondents felt comfortable about making a complaint. Interviewees said that they tried to deal with problems at the lowest level possible beginning with the child. However, some parents felt that when they approached the school about a particular issue, their concerns were not listened to or acted on.

Respondents' support for the Catholic ethos of the school impacted on their relationship with the school. Apart from gender, respondents' actions rather than their identities were influential. Frequent home-school communication along with active engagement with the schools created more positive relationships. These respondents were more likely to feel that they could make a complaint and their concerns would be listened to.

5.5 Home-School Communication

As seen in the previous section, effective and frequent home-school communication is central for developing positive relationships between home and school. This section explores how parents and schools communicate with each other, the extent to which parents were satisfied with the existing communication systems and the factors which influenced home-school communication. My observations and analysis of the notes sent home by my local school details the extent and variety of home-school communication.

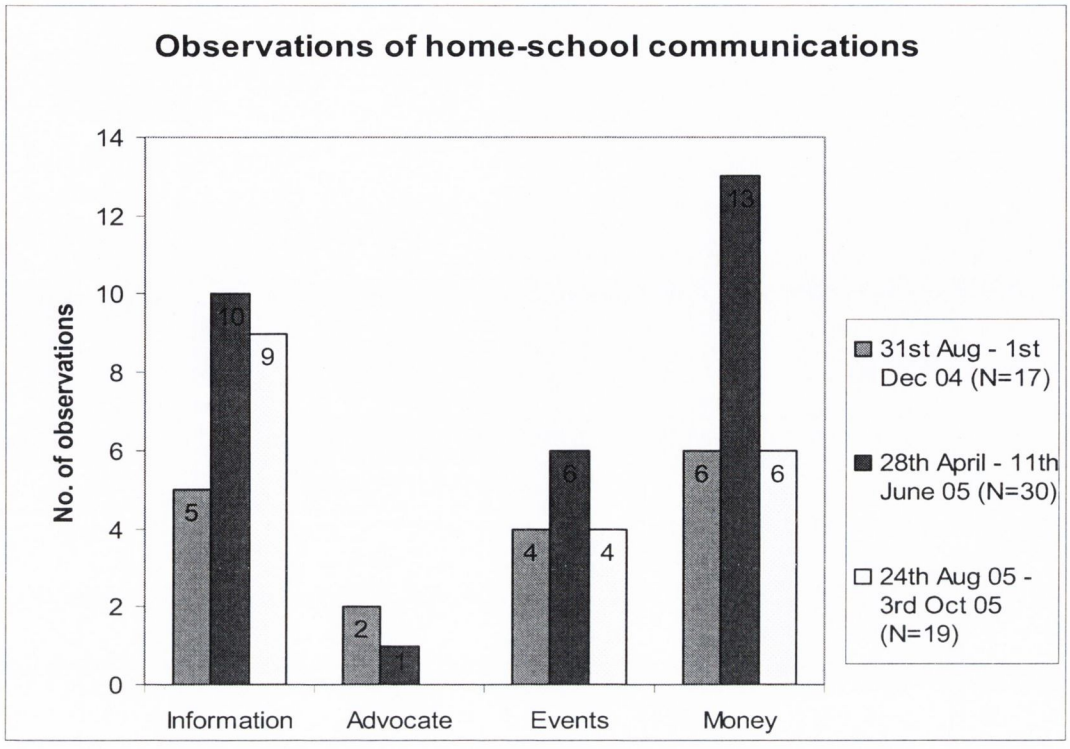
5.5.1 Observations of home-school communication

From my observations, I found home-school communication revolved around four main areas (Figure 1.25). These included providing each other with relevant information, upcoming events along with the continuous requests for money. In addition, I had to act as an advocate for my children with the teacher and school.

> D2 was worried about the maths she had done in school. She was not sure whether she was to do number one or the whole page. The teacher will be correcting it tonight. We discussed it and were undecided whether I would write a note or we would just leave it. (FN 09-06-05)

> D2 asked me to write the note to her teacher about the Maths before she left for school. When she came home from school that evening I asked her what happened. She said that they were only supposed to do question one. (FN 10-06-06)

Figure 1.25

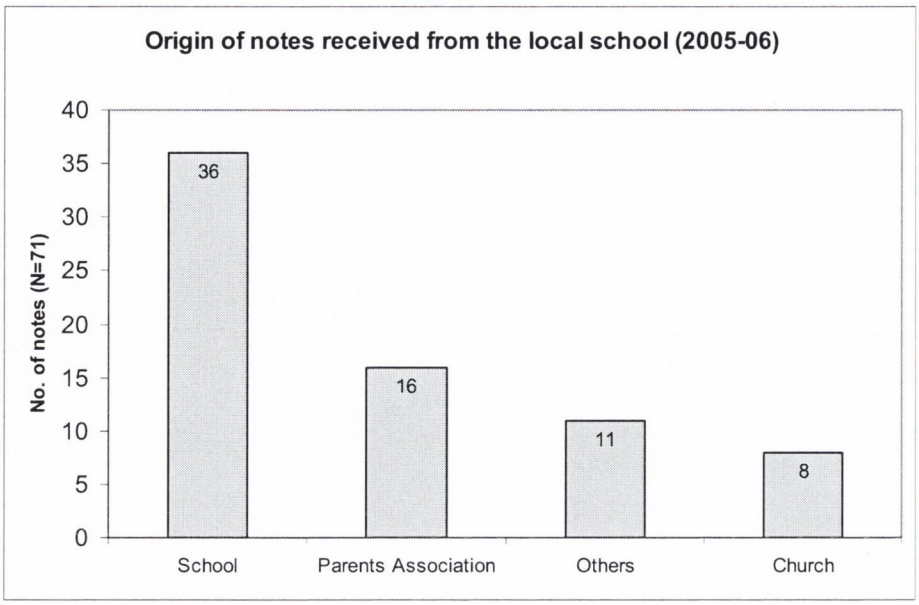


The time of the year and the stage the child is at can make a difference to the amount of communication there is between home and school. In May 2005, one of my daughters was making her first communion and the school concert was also on, so there was a lot of communication between home and school. The following extracts illustrate the types of requests from the school.

> D2 brings home a letter from the school regarding the communion. It provides information about the ceremony and a request for €5 for leaflets, flowers etc. (FN 09-05-05)
>
> D2 brings home a note from other parents asking for €5 to buy flowers for the teachers, priest and principal. (FN 10-05-05)
>
> D2 brings home a note about the communion photographs. They are looking for permission to take the photographs and are also asking the children to wear their communion clothes to school on Monday. It will be €75 for full package of photographs. (FN 11-05-05)
>
> D1 and D2 bring notes home regarding tickets for the concerts. We have to decide on date for us all to attend. The tickets cost €8 each. D2 asks me for a black shawl for her play. We search the house but unfortunately we can not find one. D1 asks me for rosary beads for her play. Luckily we have some. (FN 12-05-05)

The local school sent home about fifty to seventy notes in the school year (Figure 1.26). This averages one every third day over the course of the school year. Only half the notes school were from the school.

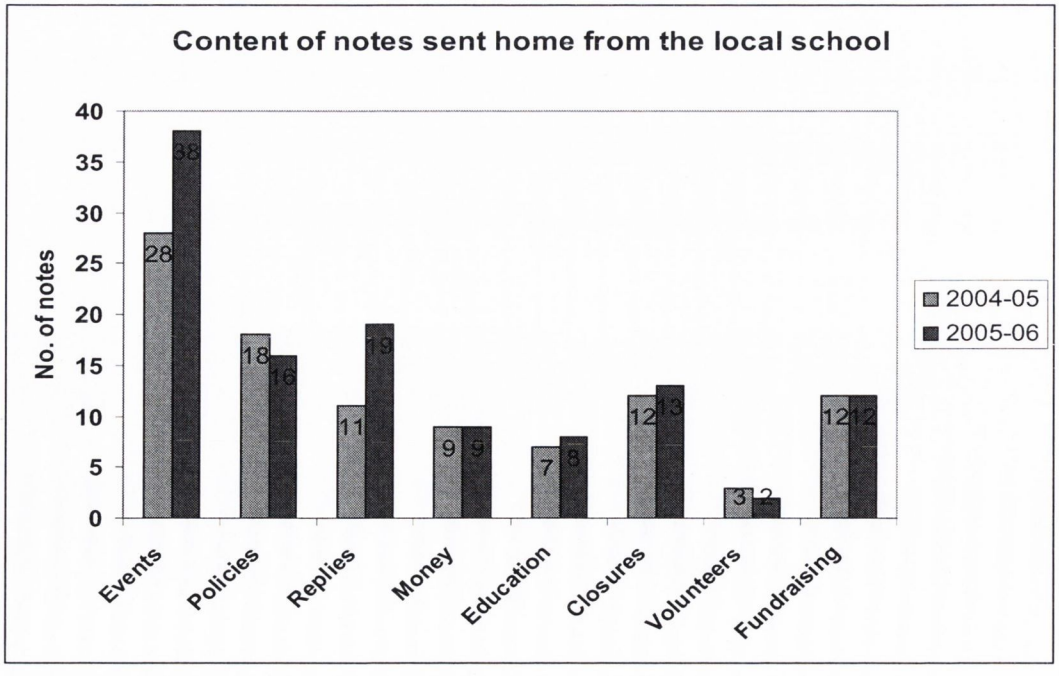
Figure 1.26



A quarter came from the Parents Association and the rest were from the Church and others like Dublin City Council, Health Board, Summer Camps and the MSReadathon. The Parents Association notes concerned the AGM (Annual General Meeting), an educational talk for parents, Communion, Newsletters and fundraising. Again, apart from the invitation to join at the beginning of the year, there were no requests for input into decision-making or policies of the Parents Association or the NPCP.

Most of the notes home concerned events that were taking place in either the school or community (Figure 1.27).

Figure 1.27

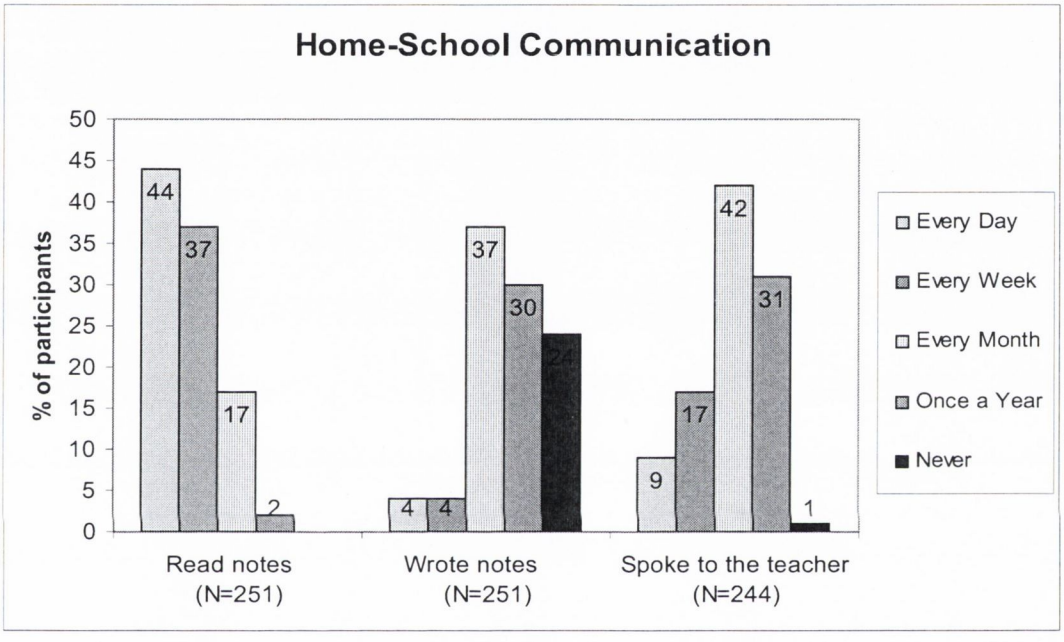


A lot of them outlined various organisational policies. Parents were requested to reply to twelve of the notes. Most of the requests for money, which was in addition to fundraising, were for extra-curricular trips and events.

5.5.2 Methods of communication

From the replies to the questionnaires, it was obvious that written communication between home and school tended to be one-way (Figure 1.28).

Figure 1.28



Ninety-eight percent (N=247) of respondents to the questionnaire received a note from the school at least once a month. In contrast, less than half (46% N=115) the respondents wrote a note to the school on a monthly basis. In fact, almost a quarter of the parents (24% N=61) never wrote to the school. Parents appeared to prefer oral communication with most parents meeting the teacher at least once a year.

Interviewees mentioned parent-teacher meetings, end-of-year reports and homework as the ways they found out how their children were doing in school.

> If you are doing the homework and you see the teacher has corrected it, and you'll see the sort of comments from the teacher on that. I mean they would have a little spelling test every week or two and again you'd get the feedback from that in the sense that [my child] would come home with the little thing with the teacher's stamp on it – congrats - the subtle sort of informal stuff and then you would have the parent-teacher meetings whatever once or twice a year
> *And do you feel that you get enough information from that?*
> O yeah, ... I was surprised at the level of information coming back in terms of the detail. It was clear that I mean the teachers really knew the kids and sort of knew the strengths and, you know, weakness and issues with the kids, you know. I would have thought that if she was standing up in front of thirty seven year olds, that she was almost doing well if she knew their names at the end of year, whereas they really, I was surprised at the very sort of insightful, feedback on the sort of end-of-year report. (I4MF)

Children also seemed to play a major role in keeping parents abreast of what was happening in school.

> [My child] comes home and tells me she passed a test. That's what I find….. There is no real information for me. I get a lot of information from the tests or if she has done well in something. It is usually her that tells me. (I3MM)

Some felt that children were unreliable and they had to be involved with the school if they were to keep themselves up-to-date and informed.

> Now my young fella wouldn't tell me too much myself so I find it beneficial for me to go to the Parents', to get involved, because otherwise I know nothing. Then he's involved with sports so I hear it from the other lads on the side line so I have my ear there the whole time. It would really depend because my child would tell you nothing. Other kids will come home and might say more. Do you remember the time they had the dinosaur exhibition here? Sure I knew nothing about it. [My child] never opened his mouth so I never knew, I'd hear nothing unless I
>
> There was a note home about that so he didn't give that to you either
>
> There, you go (FG2M)

Several variables had an influence on the amount and type of communication between home and school. Parents in the disadvantaged schools appeared to have more contact with the teacher with 40% (N=35) of them speaking to the teacher weekly (Table 1.40). In contrast, a similar percentage (42% N=64) of middle class parents only spoke to the teacher once a year.

Table 1.40
Influence of social class on the frequency with which respondents spoke to their children's teacher

Variable	Weekly		Once a month		Once a year or never		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Disadvantaged schools	35	**40**	40	**46**	12	**14**	87	**100**
Middle class schools	28	**18**	62	**40**	64	**42**	154	**100**
Total	63	**26**	104	**42**	76	**32**	241	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05

In addition, the respondents' age and their children's class had some influence. Forty-one percent (N=50) of the respondents with children in the junior classes spoke to the teacher at least once a week as compared to 11% (N=13) of respondents in the senior classes. In fact over half the parents in senior infants spoke to their child's teacher at least once a week. Younger respondents tended to have children in the junior classes and this may be why 40% (N=14) of those under thirty spoke to the teacher weekly as compared with 18% (N=17) of those over forty.

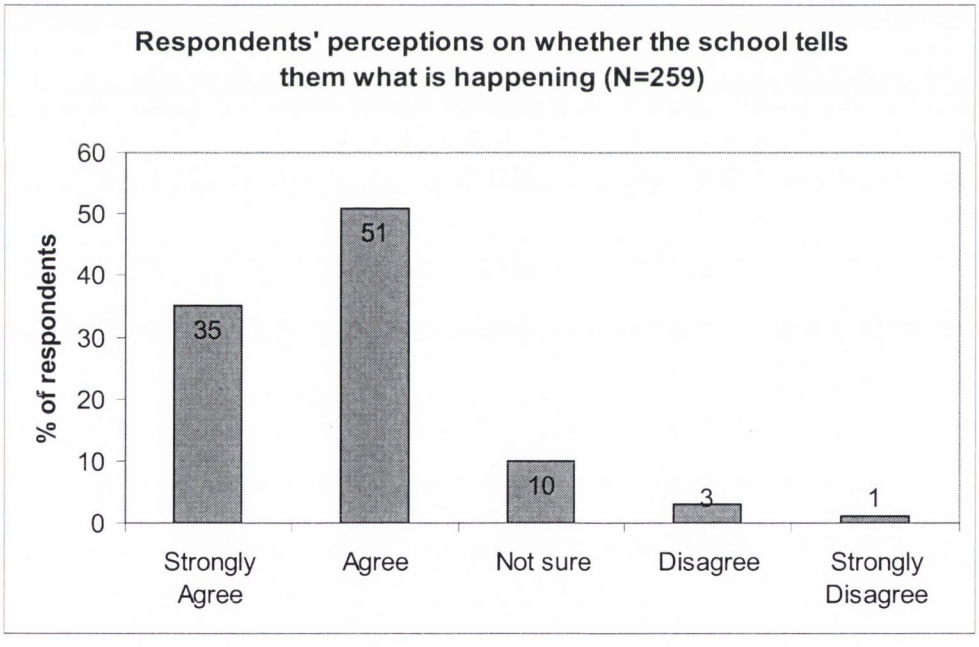
Respondents with children in the senior classes and in second level education were more likely to use written communication. Just over half of those with children in the senior classes (56% N=71) and in second level (55% N=45) wrote notes to the school on a monthly basis as compared with 35% (N=44) of those with children in the junior classes. Obviously, there is no need for parents who are meeting the teacher on a regular basis to write notes. This may be why 33% (N=41) of parents with children in the junior classes and 44% (N=17) of those under thirty never wrote notes to their child's teacher/school.

5.5.3 Quality of information

Most questionnaire respondents (86% N=223) felt that the schools told them what is happening (Figure 1.29). As one respondent to the questionnaire wrote

> The school always keeps us informed on what's going on & asks our opinion which is great. We always know about what changes are being made. (Q13DB4)

Figure 1.29



Not surprisingly, those who helped out in the school were more likely to strongly agree that they were told what was happening. Nearly half (47% N=33) of those who helped strongly agreed that they were kept informed as opposed to 30% (N=56) of those did not help out. In addition, those who examined their children's copies and workbooks on a daily basis were more likely to strongly agree that the school kept informed. Forty-one percent (N=76) strongly agreed that the school told them what was happening compared with 22% (N=13) who looked at the copies weekly.

There was mixed responses from those who were interviewed with some feeling that they were kept very well informed and others feeling that they needed more information.

> Very informed because if there is anything going on there'd be a little letter sent home ….. There is a little newsletter sent out, I think, at the end of each term and that has everything that has happened. If there was fund raising and how much they made and if somebody's sister had a little brother or what ever. (I7DM)

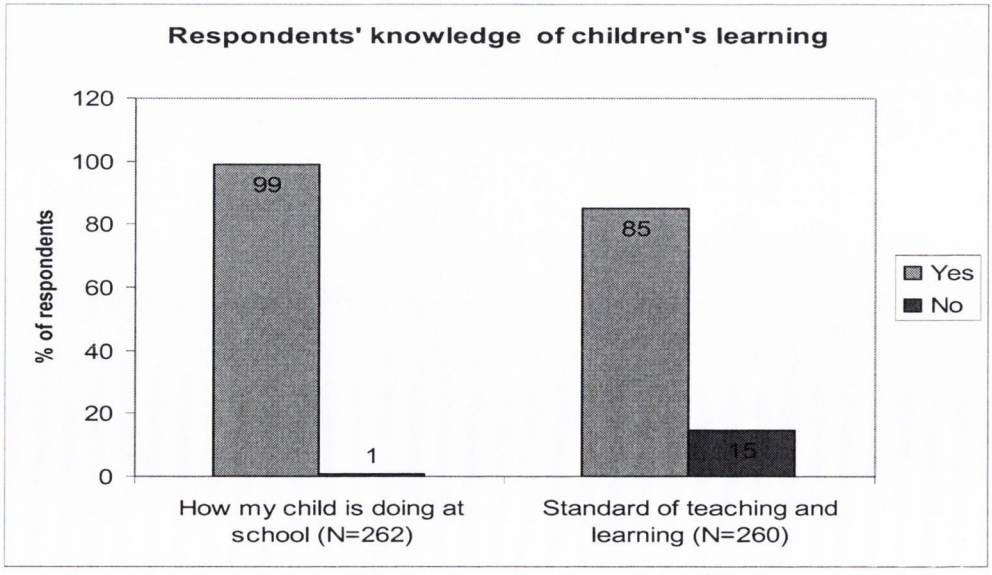
> Like you'd never hear anything back. It would just stay in the school and that's it. If a problem arises, nobody has a clue what going on or anything. 'I never heard that before'. (I2DM)

As part of my role as an SDPS facilitator I occasionally work with groups of parents on various topics. The following observations were made while helping the Parents Association of a Special School develop an information booklet for parents. It is included as it illustrates some of the difficulties for parents in communicating with schools. While all these parents had children with special needs, they also had children in mainstream and felt that the situation was similar there.

> All the parents present agreed that they were getting information from schools. However, they felt, 'They are telling us but yet they are not really telling us.' They felt that schools were managing both the situation and them rather than being open and honest about things.
> One mother said that she knew her child's timetable. The others said that they didn't and asked how she knew. She said that she had asked at the IEP (Individual Education Plan) meeting. She kept reiterating during the night: 'You have to know the questions to ask?'
> Most had very little knowledge of school's organisational policies and curriculum plans. There were more questions than answers to put in the booklet. Most were in and out of the school so they knew what was going on. They also asked questions but as another mother said to me, 'We'd need you at case conferences. Often we do not know what to say without antagonising people' (FN 13-03-06)

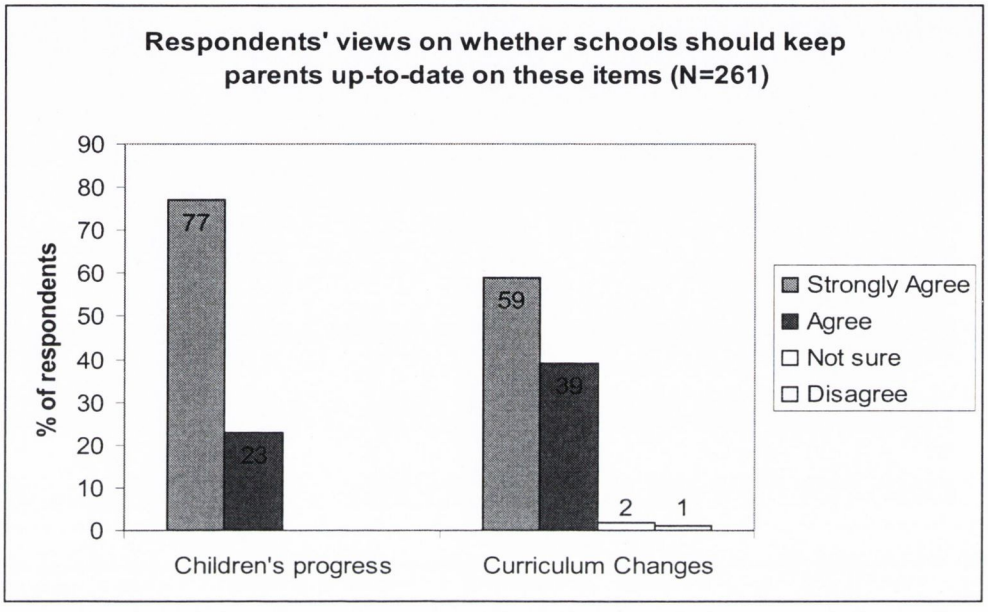
Most respondents to the questionnaire felt that they were informed of both the standard of teaching and learning in the school (85% N=220) and their children's progress (95% N=260) (Figure 1.30).

Figure 1.30



The vast majority of respondents to the questionnaire agreed that schools needed to keep parents up-to-date both on curriculum changes (97% N=254) and their children' progress (100% N=260) (Figure1.31). More were inclined to strongly agree that they needed to be kept up-to-date on their children's progress (77% N=200) than on curriculum changes (59% N=153).

Figure 1.31



While there were no significant differences between the individual schools, five respondents in the middle class girls' school felt very strongly that parents should be given the standardised test results without having to ask for them. This, they felt, would inform parents of their children's progress and ensure that they knew the level their children were at. It also meant that parents could either help the child themselves at home or get help for them, if needed.

> I feel that all parents should be given the results of the Drumcondra tests so over time you can see if your child is struggling in any area. Also the IQ results should be given without asking for these results. Sorry schools do not give these out unless you ask. (Q243MG2)

Another (Q201MG4) thought that "parents should be informed a little more about their child's progress, not just once a year at the parent teacher meeting or when there is a problem". The participants in this focus group would like a monthly report on how the children are doing.

> It would be nice to have a report monthly on their behaviour, their position in the class, meaning how they were getting on ……..
> so when your child is coming home with mood swings or really happy or what ever you have a picture of what is going on, because children do not always tell you stuff, you know
> *I know,*
> Especially when they are reaching puberty and going to secondary school and you are lost, they are telling you one thing and teachers are telling you a different way (FG1D)

Most felt that the parents should be informed immediately if their child is experiencing difficulties and that the end-of-year report should contain no surprises.

> That happened me, my little one was having killings with the teacher, for a whole year and I didn't know it. Anytime I went up and the teacher was saying she's fine, she's fine, and it wasn't until she was leaving in the summer and I got her report and I opened it when I went home and I thought there's be nothing - and there was nothing but bad in it .....
> It was saying she wasn't doing that and she couldn't do this, and she couldn't speak to her and my little one was too outspoken, she couldn't do (FG1D)

In the interviews and focus groups, participants expressed mixed views on whether they needed to be up-to-date on curriculum matters, particularly if they felt that the teachers were doing their job properly. However, as the child got older they expected that they would need more information.

> It is, I suppose, trying to keep a balance between having an active and healthy interest and not interfering or trying to go too far. Let the teacher do what the teacher does at the teacher's own pace as long as you are happy that the teacher is sort of competent and up to the job and certainly in terms of the two teachers she has had to date, both have been excellent so we are sort of happy enough to sort of stay back and to what ever extent we need to get involved, we get involved but really apart from doing the homework, we do not really get involved yet but I see that sort of changing as time goes on.
> *In what way?*
> In the sense that you'd get more involved, I mean, I do not know, but I'd imagine just out of interest if nothing else. I mean I suppose, given physically I do not expect her to be hauling a whole load of books in and out at this stage but as they get older, I presume they will be and just to have a look at what they are doing and try to support them that little bit more. I suppose going in to second level in terms of – ahem - maths or chemistry or biology or whatever that if they were sort of having difficulties, you'd try and gen back up on it again so that you could sort of support them, if needs be. (I4MF)

Even the most involved parents felt that the Curriculum was handed down from the DES and parents had no business interfering in how it was implemented.

> *What about if it was something that was being taught to the children?*
> Sure that's all come down
>
> No, sure we'd have no say
>
> We'd have no say in that
>
> I wouldn't expect it to be honest with you
>
> Like if it has come through the Department we'd just take it as (FG2M)

Despite 'taking it as is', the same parents got confused and worried when they perceived that the curriculum was not being covered.

> I had a boy who didn't seem to be doing any Irish. I was getting really worried it ..... but I suddenly found out that they weren't supposed to be doing any. The curriculum had changed. The Irish, it was all the, you know the old buntus and learning how to speak and all that and there was ..... no book, no writing or no spellings any more but I didn't know that. So I was fretting over nothing. You have to just ask, find out - that's what I found
>
> I think we were the same because I remember we had bought the Irish books and other books and we were reading them. (FG2M)

They were delighted to receive the DVD from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). They felt that because it told them what their children should doing in each class for each subject, it would help them monitor the education their children were receiving and help them 'know whether the job was being done or not' (FG2M).

5.5.4 Summary

Home-school communication revolved around school events, requests for money and information on school rules and policies. Written rather than spoken communication was the preferred means of communication and this tended to be one-way with the school sending notes home on average every third day over the course of the school year.

Homework, test results, parent-teacher meetings and end-of-year reports kept parents informed of their children's progress in school. Children also played a major role in keeping parents well-informed. Some participants, however, felt that children were unreliable and that parents had to be involved with the school if they were to keep themselves up-to-date and informed.

Most parents felt that they were informed of school events and their children's progress. While there were mixed views on whether parents needed to kept up-to-date on curriculum changes, parents got worried when significant changes were not explained to them.

5.6 Parental Involvement in their Children's Schools

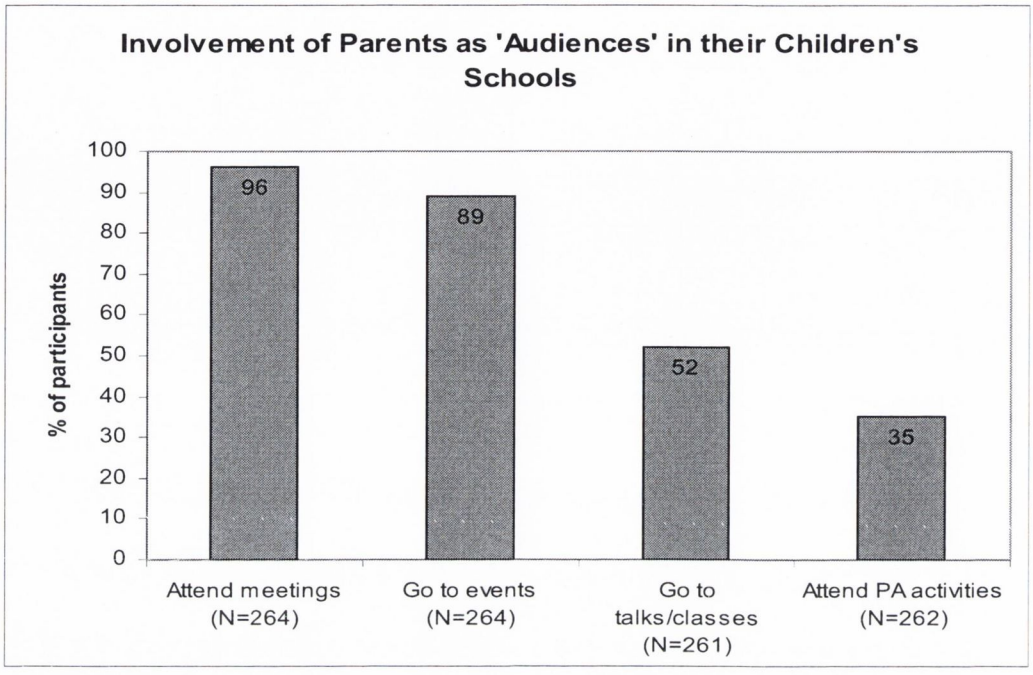
There were three levels to parents' involvement in their children's school: audiences, volunteers and decision-makers. This section examines parental involvement in their children's school under these three areas and the factors which influenced their involvement.

5.6.1 Audiences and Volunteers

Most parents' involvement in their children's school was limited to attending the 'set pieces' (I4MF) (Figure 1.32). The vast majority of questionnaire respondents attended parent-teacher meetings (96% N=253) and other school events, e.g., plays, games, concerts, etc (89% N=236). However, only half (52% N=135) the respondents

went to classes and talks organised by the school, while 35% (N=92) went to activities (AGM, fundraisers, talks etc.) run by the Parents Association.

Figure 1.32

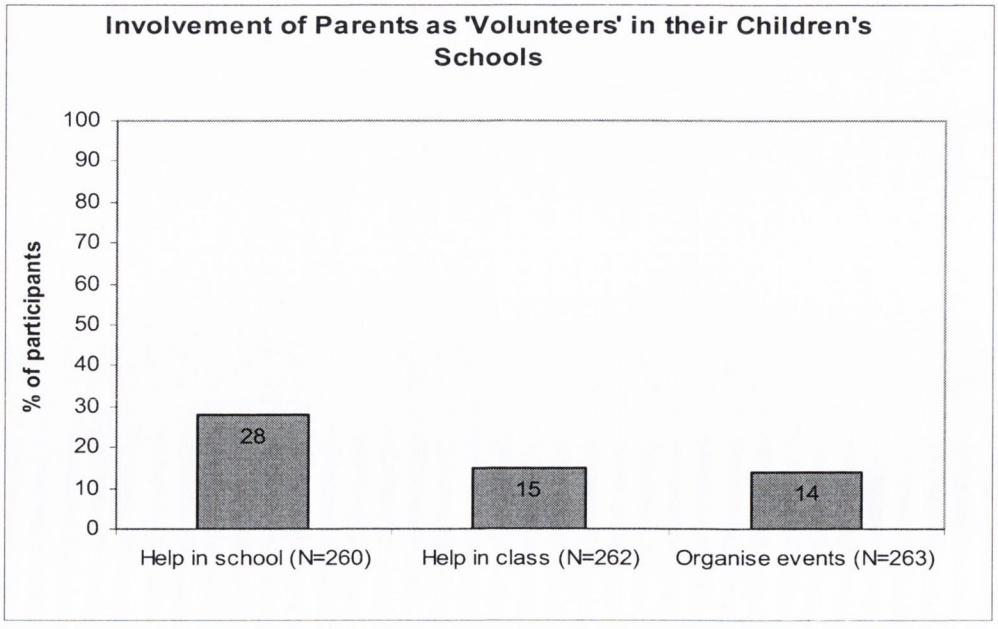


Others were volunteers and were among the batch of 'reliable' parents who volunteered to help the school on a regular basis.

> I am one of a small batch of parents who are at home so anything that's happening, some of the teachers are going to contact me and ask me would I accompany them or help out, which I always do if I can. (I6MM)

The number of volunteers was much lower than that of audiences (Figure 1.33).

Figure 1.33



Most respondents who helped out in the school also stated that they helped in their children's classrooms or in organising fundraising and other event. As can be seen from Table 1.41, most volunteers had a preferred activity with very few choosing to be involved in everything.

Table 1.41
The links between helping out in the school, helping out in your child's classroom and organising fundraising and other events

Variable		Help out in my child's class		Do not help out in my child's class		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Help out in the school	Help organise fundraising and events	10	**32**	21	**68**	31	**100**
	Do not help organise fundraising and events	24	**60**	16	**40**	40	**100**
	Total	34	**48**	37	**52**	71	**100**

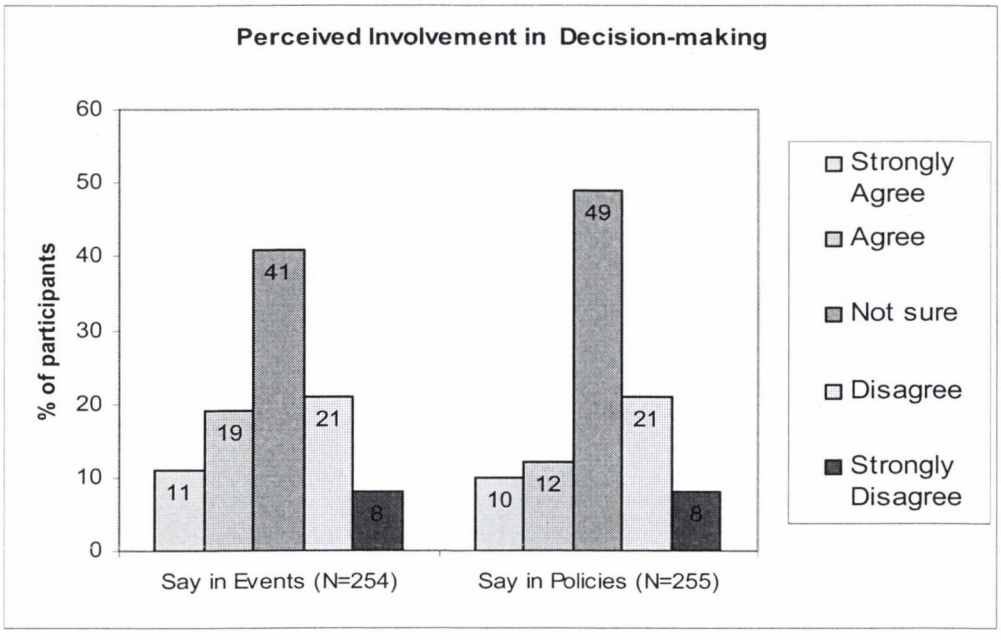
X^2=.031 p<.05

5.6.2 School Decision-Making and Governance

The 'decision-makers', who got involved with the Parents Association and the BOM were in the minority. While they may have got "fed up every now and then", they felt that if they did "not go, nobody will" (FG2M). Only 13% (N=34) of questionnaire respondents stated that they either were or had been members of a Parents Association. Even fewer (3% N=8) respondents either were or had been members of the BOM.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the respondents to the questionnaire did not feel involved in school governance and decision-making (Figure1.34).

Figure 1.34



Very few felt that they had a say in school related events (30% N=77) and policies (22% N=56). While most of the parents who were interviewed agreed that parents could have more of a say in what was going on, many suggested that it was their own fault because they had not got involved with either the BOM or the Parents Association.

> We were asked, a good few years ago, our views in a little questionnaire sent out about school uniform. They surveyed all the parents and got the answers to that. The other way you'd have any influence is if you do something like putting your name forward for the Board of Management and because I can't and I haven't, it is the same idea as if you do not vote in the general election you can't really winge (sic) about it. I could be more involved if I wished. It is not that the school is excluding me it is just that I haven't been involved. (I5MM)

Some were also reluctant to take on the extra responsibilities.

> You should have your say, but I mean who wants all that responsibility anyway but everybody should hear some of it anyway, you know what I mean (FG1D)

Most were satisfied that if they had an issue they could deal with it on an individual basis with the principal.

> Well I suppose you weren't happy and had something to say that [the principal] would sit down and listen to you. I think you would have a say, yes (I7DM)

However, even those who were heavily involved in the Parents Association recognised that certain issues were off limits to parents and that their suggestions had to suit the school's agenda.

> On the major issues, it is very limited in terms of which teacher a class will get, the structure of the school year, - those kinds of issues, we wouldn't really have any say but the smaller issues, say underneath those, you would get to influence input - if you were right. Then again, you could come up with some thing and be way off. *Laughter* (FG2M)

When asked what they would do if the school sent home a policy with which they disagreed, most parents would let the school know how they felt.

> Well I would have no problem about ringing the principal and just talking to her about it. I wouldn't think twice about doing it if I had to do it (I6MM)

Some however felt that they never got the opportunity to give feedback on policies.

> Ah, I would. If they sent me home deliberately something I would comment. .... but you just never get the opportunity really. You are never invited *–laughs - to* give an opinion..... I would love to get more of an invitation from the school as to how they do things. ..... (I3MM)

Some thought that parents had no place in school decisions.

> I think parents should make decisions at home and the school should make decisions at school and the parents should be big enough to stand up and abide by it, you know, if it is a lawful decision..... Unfortunately there are people no matter what decision you make, they want to find everything that is wrong with it. How many of those people are going to see the big picture – very few, very few, you know, so people will grunt and groan and moan about the decision because they do not want it. That's a stupid decision. Why should my child have to wear black shoes? But everybody else has to. That's the decision of the school – abide by it or move on (I1DGF)

At the end of the day, parents felt that if they were unhappy with the school they would move their children to another school. In a sense this is the parents' ultimate sanction and can cause damage to the schools' reputation through the parents' networking system.

> My attitude is that if I'm not happy with my child here and I feel I have to be up here all the time there is something wrong. I just would actually - if I wasn't getting anywhere, I'd just take the child out and get him in somewhere else. (FG2M)

The personal characteristics of the respondents or the schools their children attended made no difference to their views on decision-making. However, home-school communication, involvement in the school and attendance at church influenced whether respondents perceived that they had a say in school policies (Table 1.42) and events.

Table 1.42
The link between respondents' attendance at church and their perception that they had a say in school policies

Variable	Agreed that they have a say in school policies		Not sure that they have a say in school policies		Disagreed that they have a say in school policies		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attended church weekly	34	**34**	40	**40**	27	**27**	101	**101***
Attended church monthly	12	**17**	42	**58**	18	**25**	72	**100**
Attended church once a year or never	6	**9**	35	**53**	25	**38**	66	**101***
Total	52	**22**	117	**49**	70	**29**	239	**100**

X^2=.001 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Similarly, 44% (N=45) of respondents who attended church weekly felt that they had a say in what was happening in the school as opposed to 32% (N=23) of those attended monthly and only 11% (N=7) of those who attended once a year or never.

Volunteers were more likely to feel that they had a say in school decision-making. Forty-seven percent (N=17) of those who helped organise fundraising and other events felt that they were consulted on school policies compared with 18% (N=39) of 'non-organisers'. Likewise, over half (58% N=21) the organisers agreed that they had a say in school events as compared with a quarter (26% N=56) of 'non-organisers'. Similarly, respondents who helped in the classroom were more likely to agree that they had a say in school policies. Thirty-seven percent (N=14) agreed that they had a say as compared with 19% (N=42) of those who did not help in the classroom. However, there was no difference between classroom 'helpers' and 'non-helpers' in whether they had a

say in school activities. 'Helpers' were also more likely to agree that they had a say that they had a say in school policies (40% N=27) than those who did not help (15% N=28). They were also more likely to feel that they had a say in what was happening in the school (Table 1.43).

Table 1.43
The link between respondents' helping out in the school and their perception that they had a say in what was happening in the school

Variable	Agreed that they have a say in what was happening in the school		Not sure that they have a say in what was happening in the school		Disagreed that they have a say in what was happening in the school		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Help out in the school	36	**51**	21	**30**	13	**19**	70	**100**
Do not help out in the school	39	**22**	83	**46**	59	**33**	181	**101***
Total	75	**30**	104	**41**	72	**29**	251	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Members of the Parents Association also felt more involved in the policy formation (Table 1.44) and decision-making processes in the school.

Table 1.44
The link between membership of the Parents Association and respondents' perception that they had a say in school policies

Variable	Agreed that they have a say in school policies		Not sure that they have a say in school policies		Disagreed that they have a say in school policies		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Member of the Parents Association	17	**50**	13	**38**	4	**12**	34	**100**
Not a member of the Parents Association	39	**18**	113	**51**	68	**31**	220	**100**
Total	56	**22**	126	**50**	72	**28**	254	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05

Fifty-five percent (N=18) of respondents who were members of the Parents Association felt that they had a say in what was going on as compared with 27% (N=60) of those who were not. While the numbers were small (N=8), only one BOM member agreed that they had a say in school policies and activities, while six were unsure. Similarly, only two BOM members agreed that they had a say in what was going on, while six were unsure.

Respondents who went to activities organised by the Parents Association and attended talks and classes for parents were also more likely to feel that they had a say in school activities. Forty percent (N=51) of those who attended parenting talks/classes felt they had a say in what was going on as compared with 21% (N=26) of 'non-attendees'. They (29% N=37) were also more likely than 'non-attendees' (15% N=19) to feel that they had a say in school policies. Similarly, 46% (N=41) of respondents who attended activities run by the Parents Association felt that they had a say as opposed to 23% (N=37) of 'non-attendees'. Interestingly, attending Parents Association activities made no significant difference to respondents' perceptions that they had a say in school policies.

Just as the number of notes sent home appeared to influence the respondents' relationship with the school they also impacted on their perceptions on their involvement in decision-making. Respondents who read notes sent home daily by the school were more likely to feel that they had a say in school decisions (Table 1.45). Similarly, 33% (N=35) of those who read notes daily said that they had a say in school polices as compared with 19% (N=17) of those who read notes weekly and 7% (N=3) of those who read notes monthly.

Table 1.45
The link between the frequency with which respondents' read notes sent home by the school and their perception that they had a say in what was happening in the school

Variable	Agreed that they have a say in what was happening in the school		Not sure that they have a say in what was happening in the school		Disagreed that they have a say in what was happening in the school		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Read notes daily	44	**41**	40	**37**	23	**22**	107	**100**
Read notes weekly	27	**30**	29	**32**	35	**39**	91	**101***
Read notes monthly	5	**12**	28	**65**	10	**23**	43	**100**
Total	76	**32**	97	**40**	68	**28**	241	**100**

X^2=.000 p<.05
* Result of rounding to whole numbers

Likewise, those who spoke to the teachers at least once a month (38% N=61) felt that they had more of a say in what was going on than those who only spoke to them yearly (19% N=14). Speaking to the teacher had no influence on their involvement in school policies. It appears that those who engage with the schools are the ones who feel more involved in the schools' decision-making processes.

5.6.3 Factors which influenced parental involvement

Lack of time and energy due to other demands were cited as the reasons why people did not get involved. If people were working, had small children or were involved in other organisations outside school, they may not have the time to give to the school.

> They wouldn't have the time, in this day and age.
>
> They might have younger kids to be minded
>
> If you're coming in after work, you're going to get the dinner, get the homework done, put the kids to bed, it is a lot to be running out the door again ....
>
> You're probably involved with so many other things anyway
>
> Exactly – you can only commit to one or two things– so if you're involved with the Church on a grand scale or you might be involved with the Girls' school or (FG2M)

For some it was a matter of timing or having the necessary supports to get involved.

> I'm not personally involved in activities in my children's school at the moment. This is due to me having younger children in our family. But I have been given every opportunity to get involved and will accept this in the near future. (Q24DB2)

Others felt that if the school did not encourage involvement and the principal was not 'approachable' or open to the ideas of others, that people would be put off getting involved.

> If the principal is there, that he's welcoming and he's nice and he's approachable and that you can talk, you know
>
> There is nothing worse than going to a meeting and you are afraid to talk up,
>
> Or you can't open your mouth
>
> Or you are made to feel that what you are saying is not valid or
>
> [The principal] would never do that, no matter how stupid or whatever
>
> He's very easy going
>
> He'd always make you feel like there was no problem with whatever you said (FG2M)

Knowing people in the group encouraged some to become involved.

> Do not know, Just other people and other people, they say I'm doing it and you say I'll try it (I2DM)

However, the fear that the group was a clique and would not be welcoming was off-putting to many.

> I think that a lot of things if they think it is the same crowd all the time, like walking in to a clique, like there is always the fear that there's be a clique. (I8DM)

Two parents from the same school (Q141MB2; Q129MB4) commented that the same parents were always involved and that they would like to see some new people involved.

Another (Q199MG4) stated that she felt that the Parents Association were 'very unapproachable and they are usually parents from the wealthy families'.

Lack of interest by some parents was mentioned.

> And then well, they just probably do not want to, you know what I mean, you will always get someone that doesn't want to, couldn't be bothered.
> *Why would you think that they couldn't be bothered?*
> Maybe because it doesn't affect them and they probably think that it is got nothing to do with me so why should I go out and do it. (I7DM)

Gender also influenced attendance at school events. From my observations of the attendance at meetings and events, I estimated that there is normally a ratio of three to one in favour of women. Several factors appear to influence the attendance of fathers. Men are more likely to attend meetings in second level rather than primary schools. They were less likely to attend meetings, which discussed RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education). In 2005, my husband attended the RSE meeting because I was working and he was the only man present. Thirdly, men are more likely to attend, when both parents are specifically invited. Children can put enormous pressure on their fathers or other male relatives to attend.

> For a week before the Christmas play, my daughter continuously reminded us of the date and time. One mother told me that her child was insisting that both parents attend as they 'had' to bring two people. Her husband was working so her older brother attended instead of him. Another woman's husband was delayed getting parking and she was fretting that he would be late and the child would be upset. I counted fifteen men and twenty five women in the audience. Since the play started at 2.00pm, most people had to get time off work to attend. (FN 21-12-06)

The timing of the activities may affect men more than women. As most of the men were in full-time paid employment it may be more difficult for them to get time off work. The findings from the questionnaire appear to confirm my observations. There were no differences between mothers and fathers in their attendance at parenting talks/classes and/or activities organised by the Parents Association, which are normally held at night. However, there were differences in their attendance at school events and parent-teacher meetings, which are held during the day. Ninety-eight percent (N=219) of mothers attended parent-teacher meetings as compared with 88% (N=21) of fathers. Likewise, 91% (N=204) of mothers attend school events, e.g., plays, concerts, etc., as opposed to 75% (N=18) of fathers. While not significant, 16% (N=36) of mothers helped out in their children's classroom as opposed to only one man (4% N=1). One of the male interviewees suggested that child protection issues put men off getting involved, especially when it was a girls' school.

> [She] is a girl and my participation would be in a school with little girls. It only has to take the child to say something wrong and I'm, I'll never regain my status, no matter what who, right or wrong so I mean, so it is a bit like, you could risk everything, your whole, you could just destroy

yourself for nothing so I would be standbackish (sic) from getting involved because of the, you know (I2DG)

Social class had an impact on parental involvement in their children's schools. Disadvantaged parents were more likely to help out in the school and the classroom (Table 1.46).

Table 1.46
Impact of social class on respondents' involvement in their children's schools

Variable	Disadvantaged Schools		Middle class Schools		Total who are involved	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Help out in the school	34	**36**	38	**23**	72	**28**
Help out in my child's class	25	**26**	14	**8**	39	**15**
Attend activities run by the Parents Association	15	**16**	77	**46**	92	**35**
Help organise the fundraising and events in this school	5	**5**	32	**19**	37	**14**
Member of the Board of Management*	8	**8**	0	**0**	8	**3**
Total number of respondents across school type	**96**	**36**	**168**	**64**	**264**	**100**

* Not significant at $p<.05$

In contrast, middle class parents were more likely to both organise and attend the fundraising and other events in the school. In all four schools, the parents who went to these activities were also more likely to be in two-parent families and attend church more frequently.

The activities described by the interviewees reflected these results. Parents in the disadvantaged schools mentioned 'Maths for Fun', courses and other activities run by the Home School Community Liaison (HCSL) Coordinator. 'Maths for Fun' is where parents are encouraged to come up to the school and play Maths games with their children. The participants from the middle class school spoke about fundraising and helping out on trips. Some parents resented having to fundraise, particularly when they saw it as the only involvement accepted by the school.

Parents should be involved in day to day decisions and not just allocated fundraising activities (Q195MG6)

Some participants felt that lack of involvement might be due to a bad school experience.

May be if as a parent, you had a negative school experience yourself you mightn't be too keen to become overly involved in your child's education. You just see it as somewhere you send them to in the morning and collect them in the afternoon and that's the end of it. (I5MM)

Just as those with lower educational qualification were the least likely to get support and advice from others (Table 1.18 p.116) they were also less likely to attend school events and help out in certain activities (Table 1.47).

Table 1.47
Impact of the respondents' education levels on their involvement in their children's schools

Variable	Primary Level		Second Level		Third Level		Total who are involved	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attend parent-teacher meetings*	18	**82**	163	**96**	61	**100**	242	**96**
Attend school events e.g. plays, games, concerts etc.	14	**64**	154	**91**	58	**95**	226	**90**
Go to class and talks organised for parents by the school*	8	**36**	90	**54**	34	**58**	132	**53**
Attend activities organised by the Parents Association	4	**19**	54	**32**	30	**49**	88	**35**
Help organise the fundraising and events in this school*	1	**5**	23	**14**	11	**18**	35	**14**
Help out in my child's class*	0	**0**	30	**18**	9	**15**	39	**16**
Total number of respondents across education levels	**22**	**9**	**169**	**67**	**61**	**24**	**252**	**100**

* Not significant at p<.05

Adherence to the religious values to the school was also an important factor. Regardless of what school their children attended, practising Catholics were more likely to attend and help out with school activities (Table 1.48).

Table 1.48
Impact of church attendance on parental involvement in their children's schools

Variable	Attend church weekly		Attend church monthly		Attend church once a year or never		Total who are involved	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Go to class and talks organised for parents by the school	63	**60**	44	**60**	22	**33**	129	**53**
Attend activities organised by the Parents Association	50	**48**	26	**36**	11	**16**	87	**35**
Help out in the school	47	**45**	12	**17**	11	**16**	70	**29**
Help organise the fundraising and other events in this school	27	**26**	3	**4**	6	**9**	36	**15**
Help out in my child's class*	22	**21**	7	**10**	8	**12**	37	**15**
Member of the Parents Association	21	**20**	6	**8**	6	**9**	33	**13**
Total number of respondents who attended church	**106**	**43**	**74**	**30**	**68**	**27**	**248**	**100**

* Not significant at p<.05

Lone parents also found it difficult to attend school activities (Table 1.49). While there was no difference in their attendance at parent-teacher meetings and helping out in the school they were less likely to be involved in all the other school activities.

Table 1.49
Impact of family type on respondents' involvement in their children's schools

Variable	One-parent families		Two-parent families		Total who are involved	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attend school events e.g. plays, games, concerts etc.	61	**82**	164	**93**	225	**90**
Go to class and talks organised for parents by the school	29	**40**	101	**57**	130	**52**
Attend activities run by the Parents Association	13	**18**	76	**43**	89	**36**
Help organise the fundraising and events in this school*	8	**11**	28	**16**	36	**14**
Help out in my child's class*	6	**8**	28	**16**	34	**14**
Member of the Parents Association*	6	**8**	27	**15**	33	**13**
Member of the Board of Management*	0	**0**	8	**5**	8	**3**
Total number of respondents across family type	**74**	**30**	**177**	**71**	**251**	**101****

* Not significant at p<.05
** Result of rounding to whole numbers

One mother (I3MM) who was interviewed suggested that the more children one had in the school the more likely you were to get involved. The results from the questionnaire appear to confirm this (Table 1.50).

Table 1.50
Impact of family size on parental involvement in their children's schools

Variable	One child		Two children		Three children		Four or more children		Total who are involved	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attend class and talks organised for parents by the school*	16	**43**	40	**48**	50	**64**	28	**49**	134	**52**
Attend activities run by the Parents Association*	7	**18**	31	**37**	33	**43**	19	**33**	90	**35**
Help out in the school*	4	**11**	25	**30**	26	**33**	17	**30**	72	**28**
Help out in my child's class	3	**8**	12	**14**	19	**24**	5	**9**	39	**15**
Help organise the fundraising and events in this school*	1	**3**	14	**17**	14	**18**	8	**14**	37	**14**
Member of the Parents Association	1	**3**	10	**12**	10	**13**	13	**22**	34	**13**
Total number of respondents across family size	**38**	**15**	**85**	**33**	**78**	**30**	**58**	**22**	**259**	**100**

* Not significant at p<.05

Those with only one child were less likely to help out in the school and get involved with the activities of the Parents Association than other parents. Those with three children appeared to be the most active. It is interesting that respondents with four children, while less likely to help out in the classroom, were more likely to a member of the Parents Association. These results contrast with the involvement of parents in the home curriculum. As outlined in Chapter Four, respondents with only one child spent more time engaged in educational activities with their child at home than those with larger families.

Younger respondents, who tended to have smaller families, were also less active in school governance and the activities of the Parents Association (Table 1.51)

Table 1.51
Impact of the respondents' age on their involvement in their children's schools

Variable	Aged under thirty		Aged between thirty and thirty-nine		Aged forty and over		Total who are involved	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attend activities run by the Parents Association	8	**19**	33	**29**	50	**48**	91	**35**
Help organise the fundraising and events in this school	1	**2**	15	**13**	20	**19**	38	**14**
Member of the Parents Association	1	**2**	10	**9**	22	**21**	33	**13**
Member of the Board of Management*	0	**0**	1	**1**	7	**7**	8	**3**
Total number of respondents across age levels	**42**	**16**	**115**	**44**	**105**	**40**	**262**	**100**

* Not significant at p<.05

The class the respondents' children were in also had a bearing on whether they helped out in the school. Parental involvement appeared to peak in second class with fewer parents helping out as their children progresses through the school (Table 1.52).

Table 1.52
Impact of the class the respondents' children were on their involvement in their children's schools

Variable	Sixth Class		Fourth Class		Second Class		Senior Infants		Total who are involved	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attend class and talks organised for parents by the school	33	**44**	23	**40**	53	**65**	26	**54**	135	**52**
Help out in the school	9	**12**	17	**31**	35	**43**	11	**22**	72	**28**
Help out in my child's class	5	**7**	8	**14**	24	**30**	2	**4**	39	**15**
Total number of respondents across class levels	**75**	**28**	**57**	**22**	**82**	**31**	**50**	**19**	**264**	**100**

5.6.4 Summary

Most parents' involvement in their children's schools was limited to attending meetings and events. When it came to volunteering and getting involved in school governance structures, the numbers involved were much lower. While participants felt that parents had little say over school activities and policies, they believed that issues could be dealt with on an individual basis with the principal. The better the respondents' relationship with the school, the more they felt that they were involved in the decision-making processes. Ultimately, parents felt that if they or their children were unhappy with the school they would just move their children to another school

Lack of time and energy due to other demands were cited as the reason why people did not get involved. If people were working, had small children or were involved in other organisations outside school, they did not have the time to give to the school. The fear that the group was a clique and would not be welcoming could also be off-putting to many. The gender, social class, education levels, family size, and age of the respondents impacted on parental attendance at events and involvement in the school activities. Attendance at church and their children's educational stage were also influential.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined the involvement of parents in the education system, both nationally and locally. Participants perceived the State to have overall control of the education system. Not alone did it determine the curriculum, but it provided the resources, which enabled schools to implement it. Many felt that the State needed to provide more resources to meet their children's learning needs. While the majority of respondents approved of the Catholic ethos of the school, they were ambiguous about the role of the Church as patron of the schools. The recent scandals and the increase in cultural and religious diversity made some respondents question the relevance of Catholic schools in today's society. Most of those interviewed were unaware of the role of the NPCP and felt that parents had very little influence at national level.

The educational capital of respondents in relation to the recent curricular and legislative changes varied. While the vast majority were very aware of their responsibilities under the *Education Welfare Act 2000*, they had less knowledge about their rights under the *Education Act 1998*. Similarly, while many parents noticed the in-

service days and the changes to the curriculum at local level, less than half knew that a revised curriculum had been introduced in Irish primary schools. Middle class parents along with those with children in the education system for a longer time had the most educational capital. Those with lower educational qualifications were the least knowledgeable about the changes in Irish education.

Most respondents felt that they had a very good relationship with the school. However, there were some who felt that their concerns were not addressed when they complained. Frequent communication, adherence to the values of the school along with parental involvement in both the home curriculum and the school had a positive influence on the home-school relationship.

Home-school communication took three forms: meeting the teacher, written notes and information from their children. Parents in the middle class schools and with children in the senior classes tended to use written communication. In contrast, parents in the disadvantaged school and those with younger children met the teacher more frequently. All parents relied on their children to keep them informed about their learning and daily events. Communication focused mainly on organisational issues such as events, policies and requests for money. While occasionally it involved the parent acting an advocate for their children, curriculum matters were rarely addressed. Despite this most parents felt that they knew how their children were performing in school. However, some would like to have more information about their children's progress and the curriculum.

Most participants took a keen interest in their children's schooling and attended meetings and events organised by the school. However they only got involved with school activities either because they were asked to by the school or they felt that it was of real importance to their children's education. Their involvement in school decision-making and governance was extremely limited. Attendance at church, involvement in school activities and frequent home-school communication had a positive impact on respondents' perceptions that they had a say in school decisions and policies. While interviewees cited lack of time and fears around the 'approachability' of the groups, social class, gender and adherence to the values of the school influenced the questionnaire respondents' involvement in school activities. The respondents' age, family size and the class their children were in also had an impact on their participation levels.

Chapter Six Discussion of Findings: Home Education

6.1 Introduction

This research evaluated, from the perspective of parents, the implementation of the national policy of partnership between parents and teachers in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school. As evaluation involves the systematic collection of data about the characteristics of a programme (Gray 2004), a case study approach, involving five schools, was used. The research methodology was outlined in Chapter Three. The findings in parental involvement in the home curriculum were outlined in Chapter Four. This chapter discusses those findings.

As parents' identities have a major influence on their parenting practices, the first section explores the profiles of the respondents who took part in this research. The next section explores the roles and responsibilities of parents with particular emphasis on how gender and social class influence their values and norms. In Ireland, parents have the right to send their children to the school of their choice. Section four examines the factors which influence parents when choosing schools. According to Putnam (2000 p.296) children's development is powerfully shaped by the social capital of their parents. The supports and networks that participants use to help them rear and educate their children are outlined in section five. Section six details the involvement of parents in the home curriculum. This includes the activities, which parents engage in with their children, along with the children's extra-curricular activities. The final section explores the role of the parents as a 'supporter' of both their children's learning and the school.

6.2 Background Information

According to Reay (2003 p.52), identity is relational and marked out by differences and exclusions. The sample population for this case study was five Catholic schools, all single sex, within a three-mile radius in North Dublin. Two schools were designated as DEIS Band 1 Urban by the Department of Education and Science (DES), which meant that they were two of the 150 most disadvantaged Irish primary schools (DES 2005s p.78). The other three were in middle class areas. One school was the local

girls' school my children attended. This section profiles the participants in this research. It also attempts to extrapolate from the findings the profiles of the non-respondents.

6.2.1 Limitations and Exclusions

Like the parents in Eivers *et al.*'s (2004 p.174) research in disadvantaged schools, not all respondents returned the questionnaires (Table 1.5 p.79). These parents have been described by the teachers in other research as the 'unreachable' (Eivers *et al.* 2004 p.174) or the 'less interested' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002 p.38). In addition, only a small number of parents agreed to be interviewed and they were highly involved in their children's education. As a result, this research may only represent the views of the more 'conscientious' (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2005 p.226) or 'interested' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002 p.38) parents. In the two disadvantaged schools, the parents with more middle class values and literacy skills may have been the ones who participated and, as David (1993 p.170) suggested, have gained most from the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme and other programmes.

However, a lack of participation may not reflect a lack of interest or involvement (Edwards and Alldred 2000 p.452; Taylor 2006 p.260). Some parents may simply not have the time or may have prioritised other commitments over contributing to this research. Fathers, particularly those in one-parent families, may not have been given an opportunity to participate. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that none of the 'less interested' parents participated. Hanafin and Lynch (2002 p.38) found that, though the participants in their research were described as the 'interested' parents by the teachers, some represented the peripheral voices in the school as they saw the research as a rare opportunity to express their feelings about the school.

While the results of a case study can not be generalised to the population as a whole, Yin (2000) suggested that the generability of case studies lies in comparing their findings with other research in the same area. Unfortunately, parents were not surveyed in some of the evaluations at national level. In addition, the emphasis has been on measuring inputs rather than outcomes (Archer and Shortt 2003 p.104; Kilfeather 2006 p.3). The final evaluation report of the HSCL scheme (Ryan 1994) measured the number of schools involved in the various HSCL activities rather than the number of parents. While there are figures available in the evaluation done by Archer and Shortt (2003 p.104), they are based on the perceptions of the HSCL coordinators and school principals. The more recent research (Conaty 2006b) also tends to give details of the

percentage of coordinators engaged in various HSCL activities and the number of programmes organised by them rather than the percentage/number of parents involved in these programmes. Again the views of parents were not sought. This makes it more difficult to validate the data from this research using these evaluations. However, research by the Taskforce on Active Citizenship presents statistical and other evidence on the level of volunteering in Ireland (O' Mahony and Prunty 2007; Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007b). In addition, the results of the 2006 Census are used to compare the sample in this research with the population as a whole (Central Statistics Office [CSO] 2007a, 2007b).

6.2.2 Profile of respondents

Issues of identity are crucial to the way parents experience policy (Riddell 2003 p.184). The majority of respondents described themselves as Irish and Catholic. The five schools appeared to be relatively unaffected by the recent increase in immigration. The percentage of Irish respondents (93%) to the questionnaire was the same as that reported in the 2002 Census (CSO 2007a p.24). A higher percentage of questionnaire respondents described themselves as Catholic (94%) in this research than was reported for either the 2002 (88.4%) or 2006 (86.8%) Census (CSO 2007a p.31). It appears from these figures that the research population reflects the dominant status group in Irish society.

Social class influenced the profiles of the respondents (Table 1.6 p. 93). Middle class parents were more likely to be in paid employment, two-parent families and have third level qualifications. The percentage of lone-parents (29%) who responded to the questionnaire was slightly higher than the national statistics (25%) (CSO 2007a p.64). As with other research (Lareau 1997; Graue *et al.* 2001; David 2004), it was mainly mothers who participated. Most of the fathers, who replied to the questionnaire, had children in the senior classes in the middle class schools. The percentage of those not in paid employment (38%) was lower than the national average for women (47%) (CSO 2007b p.12). While the percentage of those with a third level education (24%) was similar to the national average (29%), there were fewer questionnaire respondents with only a primary education. Only 9% of questionnaire respondents had only a primary education as compared to 23% nationally (CSO 2007b p.21). This is probably due to the age profile of the respondents in this research.

The research population was almost evenly divided between those with children in the boys' and girls' school as well those with children in the junior and senior classes.

The questionnaire respondents' profile, however, differed according to the stage their children were at (Table 1.7 p.94). Respondents who had children in the senior classes were more likely to older, in full-time paid employment and have children attending secondary school. Similarly, those with children in the junior classes were more likely to be under thirty and have pre-school children. They either worked part-time or were not in paid employment.

According to the CSO (2007a p.20), family size has declined from over four children in the 1960s to less then two in 2006. This was not reflected in this research. The percentage of questionnaire respondents in one-child families (15%) was less than the national figures in both 1986 (27%) and 2006 (40%). It appears that larger families are over represented in this research and it may be that a sizeable proportion of the non-respondents to the questionnaires were in one-child families. Reflecting the national trend, the respondents in this research who had only one child were more likely to be under thirty (Table 1.8 p.94).

6.2.3 Summary

The majority of respondents in this research belong to the dominant status group in Irish society. While it is difficult to gauge the profile of the non-respondents, fathers, smaller families along with those not in paid employment appear to be under represented. Social class had an impact on the profile of the participants.

6.3 Parental Roles and Responsibilities

Parents are the primary educators of their children (Ireland 1937). This section discusses the findings of the research in relation to the roles and responsibilities of parents. It also examines the impact of gender and social class on respondents' perceptions of parental roles.

6.3.1 Parental roles and responsibilities

The majority of parents in this research perceived themselves as educators (Table 1.9 p.98). While they acknowledged the valuable work of the teacher, they considered that their children's education was too important to be left to the school (Vincent 2001 p.349). Parents, it was felt, needed to keep 'a good eye' on things to ensure that their

children were learning and to supplement the work of school by engaging in educational activities with their children at home.

Traditionally, parents were seen as being responsible for the socialisation, moral training and leisure activities of children, while teachers were responsible for their education and academic progress (Wyness 1996 p.55; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 1997 p.25). This was not the case with the parents in this research. They felt that parents had a responsibility for all aspects of a child's development. Attendance and providing their children with the essentials for school was seen as the sole responsibility of parents, while areas such as literacy and numeracy were perceived as the joint responsibility of both teachers and parents (Figure 1.1 p.98). However, a minority considered children's literacy, numeracy and socialisation the sole responsibility of the teacher. Interestingly there was less agreement around the areas of values, behaviour and citizenship. Some parents felt that it was the sole responsibility of parents, while others felt that it was a joint responsibility.

6.3.2 Gender

As we saw in Chapter One, research suggests that it is mothers who normally engage with their children's school (Lareau 1997; Reay 1998; Graue *et al.* 2001; David 2004). While most of the respondents to the questionnaire were mothers, the tensions between the traditional patriarchal familism policy paradigm and the more recent paradigm of egalitarian individualism (Fahey 1998) were apparent.

> It should be exactly equal to the mothers. They seem to, tend to have this idea because they work full time they do not need to do anything with the child, you know what I mean ..... (I2DM)

There seemed to be a continuous negotiation of parenting responsibilities depending on the employment levels of the respondents. While traditional gender practices and attitudes remain, fathers appeared to be playing an increased role in their children's lives and education (Williams *et al.* 1998 p.494). This was more apparent in the middle class schools.

Views varied among participants on whether mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education (Figure 1.2 p.101). In a sense, it reflects, as Keohane and Kuhling (2004 p.6) suggested, the reality of living in contemporary Ireland, which is in-between cultures and identities at present. Respondents in one-parent families (Table 1.12 p.102) and the disadvantaged schools were more likely to hold traditional views,

while those in full-time paid employment had a more egalitarian outlook (Table 1.13 p.102).

However, most respondents felt that fathers were responsible for their children's education (Figure 1.3 p.103). While the men who were interviewed felt that they were equal partners in their children's education, the women felt that the fathers' personality and interest influenced their involvement in their children's lives. The age of the child may also be important. The majority of the fathers, who replied to the questionnaire, had children in the senior classes. It may be, as Brooks (2004) suggested, that as children grow older fathers play more of a part in the educational decision-making and networking. As in Craig's (2006 p.563) findings from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time-use Survey, the education levels of the parent was an important factor in whether fathers took responsibility for their children's education (Table 1.14 p.103). Respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to consider fathers as equal partners in their children's education than those with lower levels of education.

'Maternal gatekeeping' (Allen and Hawkins 1999) may also be a factor in preventing fathers from becoming more actively involved in their children's education. The lone-fathers in Corcoran's (2005 p.143) study perceived the mother as having all the control in the relationship. The State, by acknowledging and promoting the rights of the mother over the father, undermines fathers in their attempts to co-parent. At present, fathers have no rights under the constitution if they are not married to the mother. When I worked in the Early Start pre-school intervention scheme, over three-quarters of the children had no fathers named on their birth cert, even though their fathers were involved in their lives. In addition, parents lose their one-parent Family Payment if they cohabit. This gives mothers enormous power over fathers in relation to access to their children.

Some of the mothers in this research suggested that their 'old fashioned' views on the appropriate role for a father prevented them from 'letting' fathers get involved in their children's education (FG1D). Others suggested that it depended on whether the mother was a 'stay-at-home mum' (FG2M). Being at home with the children gave them more time to develop their relationship with their children and to network with other parents. When both parents were working they were both 'as ignorant' (FG2M) and so the responsibility was more likely to be shared. The lack of time for networking, housework and childcare may mean that 'working' mothers have a vested interest in ensuring that fathers play an active role. Not only does it reduce their workload, but their

children are less likely to lose out on educational support and opportunities, while they are working. In this context, it is interesting that those in paid employment, particularly full-time employment, were less likely to agree that mothers are primarily responsible for their children's education (Table 1.13 p.102).

6.3.3 Social Class

While as Thomas (2006 p.22) suggested, being effective in displaying parental love is not in anyway tied to a person's economic or social standing, social class influenced the respondents' perceptions of their role as parents. Disadvantaged parents appeared to focus on ensuring that their children were 'good' kids and turned out well. They held traditional values on what constituted 'good' parenting, perceiving child rearing and education to be the sole responsibility of the mother. In contrast, middle class parents tended to focus on developing the talents and abilities of their already 'good' kids. They were also more likely to perceive education as being a 'shared enterprise' (Laureau 1997) between mothers, fathers and teachers.

It may be that the parents in the disadvantaged schools felt pressurised to demonstrate that they were good parents (Carlen *et al.* 1992 pp.165-6) or that they had internalised the message that they were solely responsible for their children's problems (Milbourne 2005 p.682). Middle class parents, while they may share these feelings, had a wider support network and unlike disadvantaged parents could afford to access support services privately. This gave them the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1997) to locate professional advice and expertise (McNamara Horvat *et al.* 2003 p.14) when needed and to share the responsibility of educating and rearing their children with others.

As almost half the respondents from the disadvantaged schools were in one-parent families, it may be reflecting the reality of their lives. As a single parent they have sole responsibility for their children's education with the father's role being 'really non-existent' (I8DM) apart from occasional visits. As one single mother said,

> It is 24/7 with a child, 7 days a week, for life. It is not only an hour's play here and there. I do not know but men seem to back off an awful lot and leave the mothers to do everything (I2DM)

Educational qualifications are considered one form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) and a proxy for privilege (Putnam 2000 p.186). Just as the education levels of the respondents impacted on their views of fathers as the joint educators of their children, they also impacted on who they considered to be responsible for their children's education. Those with higher levels of education were more likely to

perceive education as a partnership between parents and teachers (Table 1.10 p.100). While those with lower levels of education took more responsibility for most aspects of their children's education, they appeared to depend more on the teachers to develop their children's literacy, numeracy and socialisation skills (Table 1.11 p.100). This may be due to either their lack of skills or lack of confidence in their ability to help their children. Their isolation from others means that they do not have a viable network to help them access support for either their children or themselves.

6.3.4 Summary

Parents in this research perceived themselves as educators. Children's education was too important to be left to the school. However, traditional views influenced parents' perceptions of their roles as parents.

6.4 Educational Choices

Parents had a wide range of both primary and secondary schools to choose from. This section examines the hopes and fears that respondents had for their children. It also explores the decision-making processes used by parents in their choice of schools.

Most parents were careerist orientated (Fuller 2002 p.171; Tuohy 2005) and hoped that their children would go on to college and get a 'good job' (I7DM). However, the social class of the participants influenced both their goals for their children and choice of school. Middle class parents expected their children to do well in school and go on to college (Bourdieu 1974; 1977a). They had vague fears for their children, which centred on the education system failing them in some way. Like the middle class students in Reay's (2003 p.56) study, their children were continually shaped towards an academic disposition 'in which third level education was the logical end product of a host of earlier academic choices'. There were also extensive familial reserves of expertise (Bourdieu 1977a p.497; Reay 2003 p.55) with parents, older cousins and babysitters being able to provide advice about attending third level. In addition, many of their parenting activities focused on developing the skills needed for further education.

Disadvantaged parents had the same hopes for their children but were not as confident that their children would stay the course. They recognised the 'street' as a dangerous place, where, despite their best efforts, children may fall in with the 'wrong crowd' (I2DM) and lose out on their educational opportunities.

Respondents had a wide range of schools to choose from in the locality. The 'good name' and academic reputation of the school was a primary consideration with all parents. The 'approachability' of the school, along with its support system and handling of misbehaviour was also important. Most had used their social capital to find out from others the standard of education and behaviour in the nearby schools. While feedback from family, work colleagues and friends, particularly if they were teachers, was influential, they also monitored the academic progress and behaviour of the pupils, both past and present, who attended the school. This was similar to the research done using different samples by Hunter (1991 p.38), Hughes *et al.* (1994 p.204), Gewirtz *et al.* (1995 pp.28-9), West *et al.* (1995 p.30) and Bosetti (2004 p.398).

The difference in 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) between the middle class and disadvantaged parents was most obvious in their approaches to second level education. To ensure a place in a second level school, parents need to apply early to the school of their choice. All of the middle class parents had their children's names down in a variety of second level schools (O'Brien 2005 p.232). This was to ensure that they had a choice, when the time came to make a decision. None of the disadvantaged parents had their children's names down for secondary schools. Even, they themselves acknowledged that if 'they had lived in a different area, they would have been more aware of looking in to schools' (FG 1D). Some felt that it did not matter what school you sent your child to. They had little confidence that either they or the schools could force their children to learn if they were not interested.

It appears that while all parents have similar hopes for their children, middle class parents are more active in ensuring that their children will reach third level education. They use their cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu 1997) to choose schools and to get advice on their children's future.

6.5 Social Capital

Social capital results from the social interactions and networks within communities (Fleming and Boeck 2005 p.226). Just as it can be a useful source of advice and support, it can also be used to exclude others 'not like us' (Healy 2004 p.6). This section examines the respondents' support and social networks. It also explores the influence of the various variables on the respondents' social capital.

6.5.1 Supportive networks

Respondents, like those in Weiss *et al.* (2003) and Quinton (2004 pp.183-6) studies, received support and advice on educating and rearing their children from their partners, family and friends (Table 1.15 p.111). Like the respondents in the research done by Abrahamson *et al.* (2005 p.193), family was ranked first, followed by their partners. Children, particularly girls, were also important. This is similar to other studies, which found that girls were expected to do more housework more than boys (Leonard 2004 p.83; Evertsson 2006 p.425). According to Evertsson (2006 p.425), this is influenced by the gendered behaviour of their parents.

The class teacher was ranked fourth. This differs from the responses in the parents' focus groups, which were part of the NCCA's (2005 p.212) research. They identified the class teacher as the first and main point of contact when parents required information or assistance to support them in helping their child to learn. There were mixed views among those interviewed for this research. While one mother found her children's teachers very supportive during difficult times, another found the class teacher unsupportive and felt that she would not go to her again for support and advice.

> Like she's a very nice teacher but God bless us, you wouldn't approach her really *laughter*. (I3MM)

It was remarkable that so few respondents perceived the professional services as being an important source of support (Table 1.15 p.111). They were more likely to access the media and parenting courses than even the public health nurse or their doctor. This may be a reflection of the welfare regime in Ireland, which prefers to limit its responsibilities to those most in need (Esping-Anderson 2002a p.15) or the difficulties in accessing services at local level (Purcell 2006 pp.40-2).

Despite the fact that television and the internet gave parents access to so much information from a variety of sources (Green 1997 p.162), only a few respondents found them a useful source of support and advice. The Church had a similar ranking, though some of those interviewed mentioned the clergy as being very supportive.

> We have a great parish priest down there, Fr [name of priest], I think he's wonderful; he gives great advice when you need it and he's there whenever you want him. (I2DM)

Unlike other research (Hennessey 2005 p.59; Mulkerrins 2005 p.64) very few respondents mentioned the HSCL teacher as being supportive (Table 1.15 p.111). It may be that the parents, who the HSCL co-ordinator has most contact with, did not return

their questionnaires. Alternatively, the parents interviewed as part of the other research were the most 'involved' parents (Ryan 1994).

The quality of the support was an important factor with most interviewees agreeing that they would only to go to those whose opinions they respected. These people were perceived as having the educational capital to help them negotiate the system and make good choices about their children's education. 'Teacher friends' were highly valued. They were perceived as having 'insider' knowledge and could ensure that parents did not damage their relationships with the school when making a complaint.

Networking consisted mainly of informal chats with other parents (Figure 1.4 p.112). Very few respondents were members of a group and/or attended talks and classes outside the school. From my observations, parents use every opportunity to share information about schools, extra-curricular activities and their children's progress. The local shops, the school yard and children's extra-curricular activities were particularly useful. These conversations provided parents with useful information that helped them make informed decisions about their children's schooling (West 1992 p.216; Hughes *et al.* 1994 p.164; West *et al.* 1995 p.33-4). They were also used to monitor their children's progress and the work of the teachers. Getting involved with the school was perceived as building on this 'social capital' (Putnam 2000).

> Parents getting involved in activities helps to build a tight knit community, also you get to know the children that your child spends their day with. (Q24DB2)

6.5.2 Social Capital

Like those in Bell and Ribbens's (1994 p.246) study, participants normally networked with those whose values and lifestyles corresponded to their own. Regular church attendees were particularly good networkers (Table 1.16 p.114). These contacts appeared to shape perceptions of what it meant to be a 'good' parent and what a 'good' school looked like (Ball 2003 p.38; Williams 2004 p.7) and ensured compliance with the local norms and values. One middle class parent (I6MM), who originally chose a school in an inner-city disadvantaged area, found herself excluded from its parents' network.

> No matter how friendly I would be I couldn't integrate. Really I wasn't from the same crowd and it is amazing because it worked the other way as well because the other parents really didn't want to know me at all. I suppose I wasn't sucking on a cigarette outside the school door and you know that sort of thing - it was huge difference. (I6MM)

As a result she moved her children to the local middle class school, which was recommended by her neighbours, even though she was not entirely happy with its

Catholic ethos. The fact that she felt that her children 'literally couldn't socialise' with the other children was an important factor in her decision to switch schools.

Children's friendships were important to all the participants in this research in terms of their socialisation and choice of school. They perceived knowing 'who their friends are, who their friends' families are' (I8DM) to be an essential element of monitoring their children's behaviour and ensuring that they kept out of trouble. They observed the students, past and present, from the local schools to ensure that they were sending their children to schools with 'nice kids', whose values and norms corresponded to their own. It appears that parents protect both their identities as 'good' parents and their children's cultural capital by interacting with those who hold similar values to them (Lord 1997 p.196; Reay 1998).

There were several interesting patterns in the social capital of the respondents. Middle class parents had a wider educational network, and thus more social capital (Bourdieu 1997 p.51), than disadvantaged parents (Figure 1.5 p.114). This, as Lareau (1997 p.712) and McNamara Horvat *et al.* (2003 p.19) suggested, provided them with a major source of information about their children's schooling. Apart from their partners and friends, middle class parents were also more likely to receive support and advice on educating their children from books, newspapers and magazines. They were also much more likely to attend parenting talks and classes outside the school (Table 1.17 p.115). As a result, they were more knowledgeable about the education system. Their 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47), along with their personal investment in their parenting skills and human capital (Schutlz 1977 p.313), appeared to outweigh any of the advantages that the HSCL programme conferred on disadvantaged parents. In fact a lot of middle class parents had their own 'personal' HSCL teacher from whom they could seek advice and support.

Parents' educational qualifications are form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997 p.50) and one of the most important predictors of social participation (Putnam 2000 p.186). Respondents with lower educational qualifications were the most 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002) in this research. They received less support than those with higher levels of education (Table 1.18 p.116) even from their immediate family. Without a 'certificate of cultural competence' (Bourdieu 1997 p.50), these parents may lack the confidence to build friendships with others. They may also exclude themselves because they do not feel at ease in a social setting where they are not familiar with, and proficient in its specific cultural norms (Lamont and Lareau 1988 p.159). It is interesting in the light of

the various research findings from disadvantaged areas (Ryan 1994; Conaty 2002; Eivers *et al.* 2004) that those with lower levels of education were also less likely to find their child's class teacher supportive. The HSCL scheme does not appear to have influenced their feelings of exclusion from the school system.

Mothers appeared to have a better school related network than fathers. They were more likely to get support from their friends and to talk to other parents about the school. This is similar to the findings of other research (Finch and Mason 1993 p.176; Bell and Ribbens 1994 p.238; Graue *et al.* 2001 pp.475-6; McNamara Horvat *et al.* 2003 p.14). Fathers, on the other hand, were more likely to get support from their partners. This was linked to family forms with lone parents, who were mainly mothers in this research, less likely to get support from their partners.

Lone parents also got less support from the Church, books, media and their neighbours (Table 1.19 p.117). While one can understand them feeling unsupported by their partners and the Catholic Church, it is hard to fathom why they feel that they do not receive the same support from their neighbours, books and the media. It is not clear whether others used their social capital to exclude them (Healy 2004 p.6) or they disassociated themselves from representations of the norm (Williams 2004 p.18). The stigma of being a lone parent may also prevent them from discussing their problems with others. It may also be that the dilemmas of one-parent families are not dealt with in the media. Lack of time may also prevent them from attending parenting courses and networking with other parents.

Parents with children in the more junior classes were more likely to network with other parents. In the junior classes parents collect children from school and have the opportunity to build up a network of likeminded parents through meeting them in the school yard. Fourth class is when decisions about second level schools are made so getting advice and support from other parents in relation to school choice is important. In sixth class the social networks may be disintegrating. Parents are less likely to bring or collect children from school and may have lost interest in sustaining relationships with people whose children may not be attending the same school next year.

Two-child families received the most support from everyone except from their grandparents (Table 1.20 p.118). As they were more likely to be older and middle class, their parents may be too elderly or not near enough to help. One-child and larger families with four plus children received the least support, even from their friends. Those with larger families will be more experienced and may have 'seen it all'. They

may be the ones providing the advice and support to others. One-child families may not have the same need for support or they may be more possessive of their children. Others may be reluctant to offer support as it is a big responsibility to mind an only child and a lot of work to mind more than three.

6.5.3 Summary

Parents received advice and support from a variety of sources, particularly their family and friends. Informal networks were used to access information about their children's schools and teachers. Very few were members of a group or attended parenting courses outside the school. Several variables, including religion, gender, social class, family size and form, influenced the social capital of the respondents.

6.6 Parental Involvement in the Home Curriculum

Much of the child's learning, Macbeth and Ravn (1994) suggested, takes place outside the school and parents who may be 'missing' (Edwards and Alldred 2000 p.452) from the school's perspective may be very active in the home setting. This section explores how parents are involved in the home curriculum (Figure 1.6 p.120). It looks at how parents complement the work of school by engaging in educational activities with their children (Bourdieu 1974). According to Reay (1998 p.70), parents engage in extensive systematic programmes of generating cultural capital for their children through art, music and other extra-curricular activities. The extra-curricular activities that the respondents' children engage in are also outlined in this section. The variables which influence these aspects of the home curriculum are highlighted.

According to Macbeth (1994 p.85) and Wolfendale (2000 p.15), the home is the place where language, social skills, moral values and citizenship are taught. Respondents in this research appeared to be very involved in all aspects of the home curriculum. All those who were interviewed had certain 'preset' (Blenkin *et al.* 1992 pp.23-4) behaviours and values that they actively encouraged from an early age. Social class influenced their disciplining techniques rather than their goals. Middle class parents ascribed to being 'sensitive, supportive' parents as promoted by educational and psychological experts (Dix 1991; De Regt 2005). They had 'no rules as such' (I4MF). By modelling and encouraging 'good' behaviour, they ensured that their children conformed to societal norms.

> I encourage them to be extremely courteous and polite to people. I absolutely wouldn't tolerate children being rude or being aggressive. I'm well capable of giving out to them of course which I try not to actually. I really think that everything when it comes to children is based on example. Children see you being respectful, their parents being respectful to other people in every situation in life ..... I suppose I learnt when she was a baby to turn everything in to something that was pleasurable and fun and not to confront her and to encourage and to work a child around to wanting to do the right thing. I do that all the time and that's a skill in itself and I apply that to everything. I will never confront the children in a situation where I know that they are overtired or not going to do it so I won't put down my foot on something unless I know I'm going to win. (I6MM)

Disadvantaged parents emphasised the more traditional role of the 'responsible' (Wyness 1996 p.141) parent as demanded by the school, State and society. They had explicit rules and strict routines, which their children were expected to adhere to. They felt that because they had taught and modelled these behaviours from a young age that their children were, on the whole, well behaved.

As outlined in Chapter Four, most participants engaged in a variety of educational activities with their children. They read stories (Figure 1.7 p.121) and played with their children at least once a week (Figure 1.8 p.122). While practically everyone brought their children on an outing at least once a month (Figure 1.9 p.123), only half brought them to the library (Figure 1.10 p.124).

Family size appeared to be an important influence in determining the involvement of parents in the home curriculum. Parents with only one child provided a more intensive and varied home curriculum. The majority played with their children daily and took them on weekly outings (Table 1.21 p.124). However, they were less likely to bring them to church regularly (Table 1.24 p.126). As these parents were more likely to be younger and in paid employment, they would have both the finance and the energy to go places and do things with their children. It may be an indication of the changing trends in Irish society or it may be a 'life style pattern' (Putnam 2000 p.73). Parenting practices may change with the birth of the second child (Schultz 1973 p.S8; Gorard 1997 p.189) with parents having fewer resources to invest in their children. The lack of siblings means that only children are more dependent on their parents. Older siblings can support their parents in rearing, educating and entertaining their younger brothers and sisters (Isherwood and Hammah 1981). In larger families, the work and cost involved in catering for the basic care needs such as food, clothing and cleaning is multiplied (Fahey and Russell 2001 p.57). This may reduce the amount of time and money parents have for educational activities and outings. In addition, the variety of extra-curricular and other social activities, e.g., birthday parties, which children engage in today, can make it difficult to organise family outings and activities to suit everyone's

schedule. Parents may also be too busy transporting children from one venue to another to read or play with their children on an individual basis.

Almost two-thirds of respondents brought their children to church at least once a month (Figure 1.11 p.125). It was difficult to assess whether this was motivated by personal beliefs or social conformity (Fahey 1992a pp.257-9; Dowling 2000 p.67; Hunt 2002 p.60). Only one interviewee felt that giving their child a Catholic education was part of the commitment they made at the child's baptism (I2DM). The others were more ambivalent about the faith and the role of the Church in their children's education. Some parents took their children to church to ensure that they fitted in with the values of the school and were not 'one of those' (I5MM) who did not know how to behave in church. Others felt that it instilled in their children certain attitudes and values. Some, like the minority belief parents in Lodge's (2004 p.24) study, conformed for fear that their children would be ostracised and bullied by other children. Traditional gender patterns were evident with parents more likely to bring girls to church than boys (Table 1.22 p.126).

In addition, parents under thirty were the least likely to attend church (Table 1.23 p.126). This is similar to the findings of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007b p.15). As this generation would be most affected by the rise of the Celtic Tiger and the decline in the moral authority of the Catholic Church (Keohane and Kuhling 2004), it is difficult to assess whether this is a life stage or a generational change, as Fulton (2000b) and Putnam (2000) suggested. Pressure from extended family networks and neighbours, according to Fulton (2000b p.164) makes it difficult for parents to break links with the Church. However, this research found that, apart from grandparents, these networks had little influence on church attendance. Younger respondents with supportive parents were more likely to attend church.

The vast majority of children were involved in some form of extra-curricular activity (Figure 1.12 p.127). The parents, who were interviewed, felt that it was good for them

> to be involved in other things outside school because there again all they are doing is hanging round the streets, playing with their pals which is grand. They have to socialise and all that sort of stuff but I would like them to do something constructive as well. (I5MM)

Sport was the most popular, followed by computers, art and music. Some children had very full schedules and appeared to be involved in a variety of activities. However, apart from music and computers, children's participation in extra-curricular activities declined as they grew older (Table 1.26 p.130).

Similar to Broderick and Shiel's (2000 p.45) study of fifth class students, traditional views on what were 'appropriate' activities for boys and girls influenced children's participation in extra-curricular activities. Less than half of the girls in the disadvantaged school were involved in sport as compared to three quarters of those from the three other schools (Table 1.25 p.129). Girls were much more likely to be involved in dancing, drama and music, while boys tended to do computers more. These results are interesting because during a planning day in the middle class boys' school, I had a very hard time convincing some members of staff that they could not omit the dancing section of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES 1999a) even if they were an all-boys' school. They firmly believed that it was unsuitable for boys.

Similar to research done by Barnardos (2006 p.17), which showed that the cost of extra-curricular activities impacted on the out-of-school activities children could engage in, there were differences in the variety of extra-curricular activities` children from middle class and disadvantaged schools engaged in. This was particularly noticeable for sporting and dancing activities. Apart from their disciplining techniques and the variety of extra-curricular activities their children engaged in, there appeared to be no difference between the home curriculum of the middle class and disadvantaged parents. This is similar to the second of the two Annual Parent Surveys for an Early Intervention Strategy Project in eleven Scottish urban authorities, characterised by extensive social disadvantage and educational underachievement (Bastiani 2000 p.20). It found that parents were engaged in a wide range of educational activities at home.

6.7 Supporting the school at home

According the DES (1994 p.5), children and parents must abide by the school's regime. Parents are expected to support the school by ensuring that homework is done and that their children are 'compliant learners' (Hennessey 2005 pp.53-4). This section examines how the participants in this research supported the work of the school including the school rules and the curriculum. A lot of this work is informal and invisible. It was only through participant observation that I became aware of how much support I provided to my children's school (Figure 1.13 p.131).

6.7.1 Supporting the School Rules

The *Educational Welfare Act 2000* requires parents to ensure that their children comply with the school's Code of Behaviour. Most participants agreed with the DES

(1994 p.5) that they should ensure their children obey their teachers (Figure 1.14 p.133) and comply with the school rules.

> I have always told them to do exactly what the teacher says and do not disobey (I8DM)

While they actively encouraged their children to conform, they also provided a lot of support and encouragement to their children on how to behave at school. This included teaching them how to react when teachers were giving out to them along with trying to ease their fears around many of the school rules. Gender influenced parents' perceptions of the school rules. Mothers were actively engaged in mediating the rules for their children, while the men appeared to be more removed from the school rules and their impact on their children.

The 'power differential' (Fine 1995 p.86) between parents and the school was most noticeable in the comments made about the school rules. Most felt that they had little control over the school rules and had no choice but to comply with them.

> We got a list of them when the kids started. You get them and they tell you that they will enforce them and there is no avoiding them. (I8DM)

If parents were unhappy with a particular rule, they had no problem approaching the school and discussing it with the principal. However, they felt that rules could not be changed for one person and parents had just to live with them.

> But I think if there is a school rule you do not like, you just have to talk about it and you have to get used to it. A rule can't be changed for one person (I2DM)

This may reflect their views on society and citizenship. The school is an institution of the State. One of the goals of the DES (1995 p.193) is to enable individuals to 'participate fully as citizens in society'. Through its Code of Behaviour, the school inducts children into the norms, values and practices of civil society. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is used to teach children how to behave in a democracy (DES 1999c p.9).

> Respect – I mean I would see it as an inherent part of the teacher's job is not just in educating them in purely academic sense but educating them as individuals, you know, the kids would have an awareness of what to do, the effect on others in terms of bullying, in terms of even from a more, a ahem, broader perspective ..... As well as purely educating them, that they'd get that sense of social awareness ahem, you know, gradually done over a period of years. (I4MF)

The 'public interest' (Levin 2004 p.174) is promoted both explicitly through the school rules and implicitly through the 'positive school climate and atmosphere' (DES 1999c p.11). Parents' 'private interests' (Levin 2004 p.174) are accommodated only if they conform to the cultural and institutional norms (Lodge 2004 p.32).

Sykes (2001 p.274) suggested that once a parent decides to send their child to a school, an implicit agreement between the home and the school takes place. When enrolling their children, parents have no choice but to recognise the legitimacy of the school rules (Ireland 2000). Their only chance of neutralising their effects on their children lies in submitting to them in order to make use of them (Bourdieu 1977b p.165). As can be seen from this quote, schools use different approaches to remind parents of their obligations to enforce the school rules.

> I can't think of them offhand but I know them but I suppose over the last two or three years, you know, they have been sort of built up because we would got the pack initially, then we would have got, sort of, the constant reminders but I mean, you know, my first reaction was I do not know what the school rules are, because it is not that they are nailed on the front door, it is not that God, these are the school rules, make sure your kids follow those rules, it is not that sort of heavy enforcement policy (I4MF)

The conflict in today's society between traditionalism and modernisation (Keohane and Kuhling 2004 p.11) was reflected in the comments on behaviour. Some felt that schools were 'handling children better' (Q127MB4), with other feeling that 'since they do not smack children they have no respect for teachers, parents or property' (Q22DB4).

6.7.2 Supporting the School's Curriculum

While recognising the complementary nature of the roles, about half the respondents felt that education should be left to teachers who were the experts (Figure 1.15 p.135). Those with lower levels of education were more likely to depend on the teacher to educate their children.

All parents appeared to 'keep a good eye' on what their children's learning at school. They monitored the work done in school by asking their children about their day and by examining the copy books they brought home (Figure 1.16 p.136). Like the parents in Murphy's (2002 p.84) and the NCCA's (2005 p.208) research, most helped their children with homework daily (Figure 1.17 p.137). This kept parents informed of the curriculum and their children's progress.

By being aware of what was going on in school, parents felt that they could help their children cope with problems that arose in school. It also enabled them to 'compensate' (Reay 1998 p.66) for what they perceived as gaps in the child's schooling. They did this by helping the child at home or employing tutors.

> There are subjects I look after and subjects he looks after so he'd do anything that has to be done with Maths ..... I do the other subjects with them – like we have a balance of subjects because there would be a lot of Maths I wouldn't remember, where as he would. Then there'd be stuff that

> he wouldn't remember and I would so that's how we balance it and if we can't do it, we'd get grinds or tutors or whatever. (I8DM)

However, many parents felt that the schools were reluctant to listen to them and that they had to fight for additional resources for their children.

Like the NCCA's (2005 p.208) research on the implementation of the revised curriculum, parents were less involved in monitoring their children's learning in the senior classes (Table 1.27 p.137). There may be several reasons for this. As children move up the school they are more independent so parents are either discouraged or have less need to monitor their work. Teachers in disadvantaged areas have suggested to me that parents, due to poor literacy and numeracy skills, are unable to help with homework in the senior classes. However, Eivers *et al.* (2004 p.59) found that the amount of help given by parents with homework was negatively associated with the achievement of children in the standardised tests. Similarly, Furstenberg and Hughes (1995 p.587) found that parents helping their children with homework was associated with lower likelihood of labour force participation and stable economic status. They suggested that parents are more likely to help those with difficulties.

There were also gender differences in whether parents monitored and supported their children's learning. Mothers, like those in Reay's (1998 p.60) research, were more likely to help with homework and look at school work on a daily basis than fathers.

6.7.3 Supporting the School Financially

While parents, as Cullingford (1996b p.57) and Gorard (1997 p.253) found in their studies, may not perceive themselves as consumers, much of their involvement in the education system was as consumers. Not only did they have to pay for school items such as books, pencils and uniforms (Figure 1.18 p.138), they also contributed to the schools' fundraising efforts along with paying for their children's extra-curricular activities. Some felt that these had got much more expensive over the past six years. Changes in the curriculum had not only increased the price of books, but made it difficult to buy second hand books. Barnardos research in 2005 shows that the average costs for basic uniform, sportswear, shoes and textbooks for a primary school pupil is €225.60. These costs exclude expenses during the year (Barnardos 2006 p.16).

Middle class and disadvantaged parents differed in their perceptions of the costs of schools (Table 1.28 p.139). While the book rental scheme and a reduced number of fundraising events should mean that parents in disadvantaged areas paid less, they reported that they paid for school items more frequently than those in the middle class

schools. It may be that middle class parents pay for items in a lump sum at the beginning for the year, while disadvantaged pay in instalments over the year. Middle class parents also appeared to be better able to supplement the quantity and/or quality of state education by contributing to fundraising, paying for extra-curricular activities and by providing a varied home curriculum (Lynch and Lodge 2002; O'Connor 2003 p.397; Barnardos 2006 p.17). Disadvantaged parents were not in a financial position to do so.

Younger respondents and those with only one child were less likely to contribute to the schools' fundraising efforts. This may be the result of the increase in modern individualism (Keohane and Kuhling 2004 p.81) and/or the high cost of living for younger parents.

6.7.4 Summary

Parents supported the school in three ways. They ensured that their children upheld the school rules. Secondly they monitored their children's learning by talking to their children, helping with homework and looking at the school work they brought home. Thirdly, all parents contributed financially to their children's education by paying for books, uniforms and stationary along with school trips and events. Fundraising, especially in the middle class schools, was an important part of their support for the school.

6.8 Conclusion

Participants in this research reflected the dominant culture in Irish society in that the majority were Irish Roman Catholics. However, not all parents returned their questionnaires and it may be that this research reflects the views of either those parents who value education most or had the time available to participate. Fathers and one-child families appear to be under-represented, while lone parents are over-represented. In order to probe whether the findings are analytically 'generalisable' (Yin 2000 p.10), they were compared with other research in this area.

Parents took their responsibility as the 'primary educator' of their children very seriously (Ireland 1937). While sharing part of the task with the teacher, they monitored their children's school work to ensure that they were making progress. While fathers were considered to be just as responsible for their children's education as mothers, mothers appeared to play a more active role. While some felt that men were 'lazy gits'

(I2DM) who left most of the work to women, others felt that mothers prevented fathers from playing a more active role.

While all parents had similar ambitions and hopes for their children, social class influenced the social capital and parenting practices of the respondents. Disadvantaged parents feared more for their children's future and had internalised the message that they were solely responsible for their children's education. Middle class parents had a wider support network and were more likely to perceive education as a partnership between home and school. They appeared to be more confident that their children would do well in school and go on to third level education. All parents prioritised 'approachable' schools with good academic reputations. Middle class parents tended to be more proactive about their choice of school with all of them having their children's names down in several second level schools.

The respondents' supportive networks were composed mainly of their family and friends. The class teacher and other parents were also an important source of advice. Parents tended to network informally with other parents who shared their values rather than attending parenting classes or joining groups outside the school. Those with lower levels of education and in one-parent families received the least support. There were also differences due to the social class, gender and the age of the respondents' children.

Parents appeared to be highly involved as educators in the home curriculum with most of their children engaged in some form of extra-curricular activity. Family size, along with the age and gender of the respondents' children (Gorard 1997 p.189), influenced the frequency in which they engaged in educational activities with their children.

There were three ways in which parents supported the school at home. They ensured that their children complied with the school rules and obeyed the teacher. They monitored their children's progress and supplemented the work of the school at home. Thirdly, most parents supported the school financially, by paying for school items, giving money to the school and paying for grinds if their children were having difficulties with their school work. A lot of this work is often invisible and unacknowledged even by the parents themselves.

Chapter Seven Discussion of Findings: Education System

7.1 Introduction

While Chapters Four and Six examined parental involvement in their children's education at home, Chapters Five and Seven focuses on home-school partnership. Chapter Five outlined the findings of this research in relation to the involvement of parents in the education system at both local and national level. This chapter discusses these findings.

The first section explores the respondents' perceptions of partnership at national level. The role of the State, Church and parents in children's education is outlined. As parents' educational capital is crucial in helping them negotiate the system, the participants' knowledge of the recent changes in legislation and curriculum is explored in section three. The home-school relationship is probed in section four. Successful relationships require good communication systems. The content, method and effectiveness of the communication between home and school are examined in section five. The final section explores parental engagement as audiences, volunteers and decision-makers in their children's schools. The factors, which influence their involvement, are also discussed.

7.2 Partnership at National Level

Parents had little understanding of the process of partnership and policy formation at national level. In fact, they assumed that the State, in particular the Department of Education and Science (DES), was totally responsible for all aspects of their children's education. National policy, as far as parents were concerned was decided by the DES and taken 'as given' (FG2MC) at local level.

As citizens and welfare recipients, most parents felt that the State was not meeting its basic responsibilities towards their children.

> I think they give up very easily on certain schools, certain children and the funding isn't there for a lot of the stuff kids need so to me that is down to them. (I8DM)

Schools, they felt, were not properly resourced. Class sizes were too high in middle class areas and children with learning difficulties were not getting the support they needed. This put additional pressure on parents to monitor their children's progress and ensure

that their education was not neglected due to the shortfall in state provision. Others felt that the State could do more as the 'good parent' (Pinkney 2000 p.251) or provider to subsidise the costs of education. This included helping parents to defray the costs of extra-curriculum activities. Parents, it appears, are not happy with the State's policy of limiting its responsibility to those most in need and encouraging private market solutions as the norm (Epsing-Anderson 2002a p.15; Fine-Davis *et al.* 2004 p.59). They felt that it did not support them as parents and was detrimental to the best interests of their children.

All the schools in this research were under the patronage of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. Though their children were attending Catholic schools, most of those interviewed were very ambiguous about the governance role of the Catholic Church. They found it very difficult to describe its role.

> Well they [the Church] run this school, they have a hold over, bar the Educational Board or who ever funds it, how it works .....
>
> Well I do not know an awful lot about them - may be they do give loads of support .....
>
> But isn't that mad, we should know about it because they have the running of the place (FG1D)

If the goal of Catholic education is to socialise pupils into a tradition and a way of life (Inglis 1998 p.6; Rodger 1999 p.316), the schools in this research appeared to be doing a good job. As the Commission on the Family (1998 p.548) found, there was considerable support for maintaining the Catholic ethos of the school with most parents agreeing that the Catholic values of the school were very important. Regular attendees at church were more supportive of the ethos of the school (Table 1.29 p.145). However, even those who were very ambiguous about their faith wanted their children to take part in the schools' religious activities and were careful not to contradict what was taught in school (Inglis 1998 p.57; Lodge 2004 p.29).

Some participants questioned the Church's involvement in education in today's increasingly secular, multi-cultural, almost post-Christian (Fullar 2002 p.173; Tuohy 2005 p.113) society. While parents were enthusiastic about the input of the local clergy in visiting the schools and preparing the children for the sacraments, some felt that the connection between the school and the Church, in particular the local parish, had weakened over the years. The school was no longer used to inform and/or involve parents and children in parish events and activities. Others, due to the recent Church scandals and their own lack of faith, resented the influence of the Church over their children's education. They, like Rodger (1999 p.320) and Tuohy (2005 p.122),

wondered how realistic it was to expect schools, especially those with an increasing number of non-Catholic pupils, to continue to emphasise Catholic traditions and beliefs. This had an influence on their relationship with the school.

The Minister for Education, according to the *Education Act 1998,* must make all reasonable efforts to consult with national associations of parents on all aspects of national policy (Ireland 1998 p.12). Most participants in this research were unaware of this (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2005 p.215) and felt that parents as a group had very little influence at national level. While participants could list the various methods that can be used to protest, most had little confidence that parents' views were listened to or acted on.

> We do not have influence. To ask me as a parent, how can I ensure. I can't ensure. I can make quiet protests. Unless we collectively get together ..... but by and large everybody's working now, mortgages are huge ... they haven't got time to be protesting against the State... you can draw up a petition and go around to every door and you sign your name and you hand it in 'There's a 100 people down in [the local area] think that it is wrong to be teaching German in the [disadvantaged] school'. 'Well yeah, that's okay but we are still teaching German'. Where do you go? We do not have any influence. (I1DGF)

Historically, the institutional authority of both Church and State exercised a powerful control over the citizenry and inhibited questioning and dissent (Hilliard 2003 p.31). The women in Hilliard's (2003) study reacted in two ways. Some passively accepted things the way they were and did what was expected of them. Others adopted a strategy of deliberate distancing and avoided complying with certain requirements. Passivity was a notable feature in the interviewees' replies to the question on parental influence on educational policy. Most felt that there was no point in complaining or protesting as their concerns would not be addressed. Even the most active parents were prepared to accept certain issues 'as is' (FG2M) and comply with the boundaries as defined by the State.

7.3 Educational Capital at National Level

Over the past six years, the majority of participants had noticed various changes at local level (Table 1.30 p.148). Changes in curriculum and attitudes towards parents were the two items that were mentioned most. Most of the changes noticed were specific to the local schools such as additional educational activities and programmes along with building improvements.

The vast majority of parents were very aware of their responsibilities under the *Education Welfare Act 2000* (Figure 1.19 p.148). They knew that the school had to

report them to the Education Welfare Officer (EWO) if their children missed twenty days of school and that they could be taken to court for non-attendance. Respondents were also aware that they were entitled to the schools' Code of Behaviour. This is probably due to the fact that the *Education Welfare Act 2000* concentrates mainly on attendance (Table 1.1 p.46) and the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) is responsible for its implementation. Not only does it keep parents informed of their obligations under the Act through leaflets and the media, it follows up on non-attendance reported by the schools. In addition, schools themselves remind parents of their obligations under the Act.

According to Riddell (2003 p.194), very few parents are informed of their rights beyond the legal minimum. This was obvious in relation to the *Education Act 1998* (Figures 1.20; 1.21 pp.149-50). About three-quarters knew that they were entitled to see their children's records and take a Section 29 Appeal if the school refused to enrol their child. The same number was also aware that the parents were represented on the Board of Management (BOM) and that the BOM had to keep parents informed of all school matters. Only half knew that they had to be consulted by the BOM and that they were entitled to access the school's financial accounts. Several factors were responsible for this information deficit. The *Education Act 1998* is a complex piece of legislation, which covers a wide range of educational issues (Table 1.1 p.46). In addition, different agencies are responsible for the implementation of different sections of the Act. There was no information leaflet produced which summarised the Act for parents and outlined their rights and the rights of their children. The School Development Planning Support (SDPS) (2004) leaflet just highlights their involvement in the development of the school plan (Table 1.2 p.47). In addition, schools may not be particularly interested in informing parents of their rights.

Despite the respondents' awareness of curriculum changes and the in-service days, slightly less than half knew that a revised curriculum had been introduced in Irish primary schools (Figure 1.23 p.151). Furthermore, their knowledge of the content of the curriculum was very slight with most perceiving it as something over which they had little influence. Most were quite happy to leave it up to the teachers as long as they were 'sort of competent and up to the job' (I4MF). Apart from an introductory booklet (DES 2000a) when the curriculum was first introduced, there had been no other communication with parents on a national level. Following the NCCA's (2005) review of the implementation of the revised curriculum, a DVD was issued to all parents

(NCCA 2006a p.7). However, this did not arrive in schools until the questionnaires and interviews were finished. The last focus group were the only ones to have received it. These participants welcomed it, especially as it would tell them what their child was 'learning in each subject at each class level of primary school' (NCCA 2006a p.7). Parents' awareness of the introduction of the revised curriculum may have increased since receiving the DVD.

It appears that there is an information deficit at national level. While the media highlights the agenda of teachers' unions and issues of resources, there is little debate about the purposes of education and the impact of the policy changes on schools and children. In addition, while teachers have the opportunity to discuss national policy on planning days and at staff meetings, there is no similar forum for parents. While the DES asks that copies of circulars and other documentation are made available to parents, this does not happen on a systematic basis. Parents, whose Parents Associations are affiliated to the National Parents Council Primary (NPCP), are probably the best informed as they receive a regular newsletter. However, not all schools are affiliated to the NPCP. Even when 'all them brochures and things' (FG1D) come home, they may not even be read, let alone have an impact on parents' knowledge. As a result, parents may only notice the changes that impact on them personally (Moos *et al.* 1998 p.66). Part of the problem is that nobody has overall responsibility for informing parents of changes to national polices or monitoring that schools pass on the information. As a result, parents are dependent on their social capital (Croll 2004 p.398; Putnam 2000 p.289), the goodwill of the school and their children's memory to keep them informed.

It is important to remember that lack of knowledge or educational capital does not stop people from being effective parents. According to Michael (2004 p.437), there are three discourses of ignorance: 'can't'; 'do not need to' and 'do not want to' and the motivation behind each of them is very different. In the case of parents in this research, 'do not need to' appeared to be the underlying factor. Over a third stated that parents did not need a copy of the school plan (Figure 1.22 p.150), despite their entitlement to it under the *Education Act 1998.* Despite being fully aware of their entitlement to the Code of Behaviour (Figure 1.19 p.148) just over half had a copy. This may be an indication of 'passive acceptance' (Hilliard 2003 p.188) of welfare recipients or the 'complicitous silence' (Bourdieu 1977b p.188) of supporters, who implicitly accepted the school rules. Even parent 'educators' may be like those in Riddell's study (2003 p.194) and trust teachers as professionals to do the right thing. Alternatively, it could be that the multi-

dimensional part parents play in their children's lives (Wolfendale 1996 p.3) leads them to prioritise their children's more immediate needs and their relationship with the school over more abstract rights.

Several variables, particularly social class and educational qualifications (Tables 1.31; 1.32 p.153) influenced the respondents' educational capital. The longer they and their children were in the education system the more educational capital they acquired. Older parents (Table 1.33 p.154) and those with children in the senior classes and secondary school were more likely to be aware of their rights and responsibilities under the legislation along with the introduction of the revised curriculum.

7.4 Home-School Relationships

Positive home-school relationships are necessary if parents, teachers and the school are to work in partnership. Unlike the participants in Hanafin and Lynch's (2002 p.44) study, most parents in this research felt that they had a good relationship with their children's school (Figure 1.24 p.155) and felt welcome there. Many commented on the change in attitude towards them over the last six years. They perceived the school to be more 'approachable' with parents being encouraged to become more involved in various activities. Most felt that they could talk to the teachers and that they were listened to. They were also sympathetic to the difficulties teachers faced daily in trying to teach the curriculum, while at the same time meeting the learning needs of the children.

> You have got to get through the curriculum. You've got to watch the special needs and deal with 30 different personalities every day. (FG1D)

As Reay (1998 p.71) found in her research, the dynamics of power appeared to influence home-school relationship. Surveillance or 'ear to the ground' (FG2M) was a key element in the home-school relationship. Parents monitored their children's schools very carefully. Before enrolling their children they discussed the school with others and watched the behaviour of the children attending the school. This helped them to decide if the school was suitable for their children. They were also vigilant in monitoring their children's learning in school (Vincent 2001 p.351). By discussing the school day with their children and checking their copies and workbooks (Figure 1.16 p.136), they assessed their children's progress and whether they needed additional help. In addition, their social networks and involvement in school activities ensured that they had enough

information about the operation of the school to act as an advocate for their children, when issues arose (Graue *et al.* 2001 pp.481-3; Vincent 2001 p.357).

Schools control parents' access to the building, personnel, resources and information. Being aware that their relationship with the school was very much on the school's terms, parents prioritised choosing 'approachable' schools for their children. As a result they felt comfortable about making a complaint (Figure 1.24 p.155) but were careful not to damage their relationship with school when doing so. Most tried to deal with problem at the lowest level possible beginning with the child and would only approach the BOM and the DES if all else failed. However, there were other parents that went directly to the DES. This was to inform themselves of national policy and their rights before approaching the school. Others asked a teacher from another school.

Some parents, because of past experiences, felt uncomfortable about approaching the school. As Cullingford (1996a p.5) suggested there were impenetrable barriers, which prevented parents feeling totally comfortable in the school environment. Parents felt that they were encroaching on professional territory and 'not nearly qualified enough' (I3MM) to bring issues to the teachers' attention.

> Well that's my feeling about the school anyway .... They very very much want to be in control of that and you are just the parent ..... and it is probably that it just a feeling, I do not know, but that's the sense I get, you're not invited in, we do this kind of thing, we're the educators and you just stay back (I3MM)

Those, who tried to 'modify the school's provision' (Reay 1998 p.68) for their children, met with mixed results. In some cases, the school eventually provided the additional resources, while in other cases the school refused to acknowledge that there was a problem. Parents were left feeling that their fears and concerns were ignored (Milbourne 2005 p.685; Mulkerrins 2005 p.66) and that they were effectively excluded from the process of educating their child (Coleman 1998 p.13).

> Do not feel that teachers always listen to what you have to say as a parent. Have felt quite helpless to help my child to get a place in a resource class. Have paid for grinds because there was no space. I really felt his life was being wasted. (Q150MB2)

When help from the school and the DES is not forthcoming, they have to 'compensate' (Reay 1998 p.66) for the school's lack of resources by either helping their children at home or paying for grinds.

Other research found that middle class parents had a better relationship with the school than disadvantaged parents (Lareau 1997 p.709; Hanafin and Lynch 2002 p.41). This was not evident in this research. The majority of respondents, regardless of what school their children attended, had a good relationship with the teachers. While some

parents found it difficult to approach teachers or make a complaint, this was not confined to any one type of school.

Communication is a vital part of any relationship. A good home-school relationship can be defined as one where parents feel that they are listened to by teachers and can make a complaint. Respondents who spoke to their child's teacher daily (Table 1.35 p.159) and read the notes sent home weekly (Table 1.36 p.160) had a better relationship with the school as compared to those who were less active in communicating with the school.

Gender was also influential. Mothers were more active than fathers in communicating with the school. They had more frequent contact with the principal (Table 1.34 p.158) and their children's teachers. In addition, mothers had a different perspective on their relationship with the school. Fathers appeared to see the school as a service provider and could outline very clearly their expectations of the teachers. Mothers, on the other hand, saw the work of the teacher as an extension of their work at home. The majority had great praise for the work of the school and the support of teachers when they and their children were going through difficult personal circumstances. They appeared to have more 'moral affective' relationships (Bourdieu 1977b p.19) with the school.

In today's society, parental involvement in their children's education could almost be called a religion. As seen in Chapter Four, it unites parents into a group leading a common life (Durkheim 1971 p.44). Not only do they think in the same way about what it means to be a 'good' parent but they translate these ideas into common practices, which influence their relationship with the school. Like the parents in Cullingford's (1996a p.5) research, those who were supportive of the Catholic values of the school and attended church weekly had a better relationship with the school (Tables 1.37; 1.38 pp.160-1). Monitoring children's school work and helping out in the school (Table 1.39 p.161) also had a positive effect on home-school relationships. It is not clear whether the minority, whose values differ from the norms of the school, were passive (Hilliard 2003 p.44), silenced (Devine *et al.* 2004 p.246) or detached from the school and its activities (Vincent 1996 p.149; Hilliard 2003 p.40). In addition, the school, as Hughes *et al.* (1994 p.164) suggested, may resist these parents becoming involved in making decisions about their children's schooling.

7.5 Home-School Communication

From my observations, home-school communication revolved mainly around school events, information and money (Figure 1.25 p.163). Occasionally parents are required to act as advocates for their children and intervene to support them. The frequency of this communication was dependent on the time of the year and the children's ages. In addition, the school was used by others to communicate with their parent body (Figure 1.26 p.164). These included the Parents Association, the Church, statutory agencies such as the Health Service Executive, Dublin City Council and groups advertising extra-curricular activities.

Written communication was the schools' preferred means of communication (Figure 1.28 p.165). This, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1997 p.148) found, tended to be one-way. From my observations, the school sent home a note on average every third day over the course of the school year. In contrast, less than half the parents wrote to the school once a month. Like in Hughes *et al.*'s (1994 p.169) study, this communication was of a fairly limited nature and tended to concentrate on requests for help along with information about school activities and events (Figure 1.27 p.164). Very few notes informed parents about the curriculum or matters of educational importance, which meant that parents, like those in de Abreu and Cline's (2005 p.709) study had very limited access to what their children were studying in school. Despite the limited nature of this communication, respondents who read notes more frequently had a better relationship with the school (Table 1.36 p.160) and felt more involved in the school decision-making processes (Table 1.45 p.177).

Verbal communication also had a positive influence on home-school relationships (Table 1.35 p.159). Along with disadvantaged parents (Table 1.40 p.166), younger parents and those with children in the junior classes met the teacher more frequently. As they are more likely to accompany their children to and from school, they have more opportunities to meet the teacher informally. Since older children are more independent, respondents with children in the senior classes and secondary school have to rely on written communication.

Schools also used parent-teacher meetings and end-of-year reports to inform parents about their children's progress. However, children played a major role in keeping parents abreast of what was happening in school (Hughes *et al.* 1994 p.168; Epstein and Seyong 1995; Lareau 1997). Most of those who were interviewed discussed

the school day with their children and observed the 'demeanour and motivation of their children towards school activities' (Bastiani 1989 p.38). They also used their child's homework, test results along with their school work to keep themselves informed on what their child was doing in school.

Some parents, like those in Bridgemohan *et al.*'s (2005 p.7) study, felt that children were undependable. To keep themselves informed, they had to network and get involved with the school.

> My opinion is that if you are not there or you're not at the meetings, you can't know, because your child is not going to tell you. They are only going to tell you the things that are important to them - like so and so had two apples for his lunch - but sure that's no good. (FG2M)

It appears that they were aware, as Edwards and Alldred (2000 p.446) found, that children can control communication between home and school by deciding what information is passed on or withheld. By getting involved personally they had access to this information.

Most participants felt that the school kept them informed of school events and activities (Figure 1.29 p.167).

> O very informed, there is a torrent of notes coming out, ahem you know, and the newsletter every week or two, so I think we would be very aware of what's going on. (I4MF)

Many parents were proactive in ensuring that they knew what was happening by helping out in the school and examining their children's copies and workbooks. Some, however, were less than happy with the school's communication system. They felt upset that they had missed out on certain events due to the school's failure to communicate with them.

> You do not know what they are doing. [My child] had a session with a little music festival they had over in Tallaght. Well I knew nothing about that until [she] asked me for the €2 for the bus……..She looked for a cap off me another time. Again, 'What do you want the cap for?' 'Oh, we are going over to-morrow to do ……" - like a Feis or something but I would have loved to have known that. They told me then 'Oh, the parents can go'. I work but if I had known I would have went. (I3MM)

Most respondents knew how their child was progressing along with the standard of teaching and learning in the school (Figure 1.30 p.168). Like the parents interviewed by the NCCA (2005), they thought that schools needed to be pro-active in keeping parents informed of their children's progress and curriculum changes (Figure 1.31 p.169). This included the results of the standardised tests. Some felt there was a need for more regular communication than the annual parent-teacher meeting and problem-orientated approach at present (Bridgemohan *et al.* 2005 p.10).

The dynamic of power infused all aspects of home-school communication. The schools 'controlled' (I3MM) the amount of information parents received. Parents'

cultural capital, their knowledge of the 'questions to ask' (FN 13-03-06) influenced their interactions with the school and the amount of information they received. Many respondents were hesitant in approaching the school for fear of 'antagonising people' (FN 13-03-06). Parents appeared to accede to the DES's right to decide on the 'subject matter to be taught and the manner of teaching' (Department of Education 1994 p.5). Apart from their right to withdraw their children from religious instruction, they felt that they had no business interfering in the curriculum as taught in the school. Nevertheless, parents got confused and anxious about major changes, which they were not informed about (Vincent 1996 p.152; Fullan 2001 p.197).

7.6 Parental involvement in the School

This section examines the involvement of parents in their children's school. It looks at how the respondents participated in their children's schools by attending events, helping out with school activities and getting involved in decision-making and governance.

7.6.1 Audience and Volunteers

All the parents in this research were involved in their children's schools. As can be seen in Chapter Five, this was limited, for most participants, to what one interviewee (I4MF) described as the 'set pieces' (Figure 1.32 p.172). These included attending parent-teacher meetings and events such as plays, concerts and games. Events such as talks and classes organised by the school or activities organised by the Parents Association, which did not directly involve their own children and the class teacher, were not as popular. There appeared to be an almost implicit consensus (Bourdieu 1977b) among parents and teachers that these rituals fulfilled the basic requirement for being an 'interested' (Hanafin and Lynch 2002 p.38) and 'conscientious' parent (NCCA 2005 p.226).This allowed schools to control their contact with parents (Burke 1992 pp.189-90; INTO 1997 p.17; Scanlon-Feeley 2004 p.103) and parents to limit their involvement in the school.

When it came to actually volunteering, the numbers involved were much lower than for attending events (Figure 1.33 p.172). While just over a quarter helped out in the school, less than a fifth helped out in their children's classrooms and organised fundraising and other events in the school. Most had a preferred activity (Table 1.31

p.173). These finding are similar to those of the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2007b p.29) and the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007b p.5) and the figures provided by Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme on the number of parents who helped out in disadvantaged schools (Conaty 2006b pp.131-4). However, there is a considerable discrepancy between my findings and those of Archer and Shortt's (2003 p.81) evaluation of the HSCL scheme. Using a questionnaire sent to the HSCL coordinators and their principals, they found that 50% of parents helped with classroom activities and 84% helped with school activities to some extent. This may be the result of a different research methodology or the over reporting by principals and the HSCL coordinators of the involvement of parents in school activities.

Although most parents did not put themselves forward as volunteers, they appeared to be quite happy to help out when asked. Like in Murphy's (2002 p.84) research in a Gaelscoil, they were most likely to get involved when it directly concerned or benefited their own child. As with volunteers in the community (Molloy 2005 p.136), lack of time and energy due to other demands were cited as the reasons why parents did not get involved more. The fear that the group was a clique and would not be welcoming was off-putting to some. In contrast to Donaghue's (2002 p.71) research, where participants did not volunteer because they had either never thought about it or had never been asked, most of the respondents in this research felt that the schools had given them 'every opportunity to get involved' (Q24DB2).

7.6.2 School Decision-making and Governance

Unlike Murphy's (2002 p.86) research in a Gaelscoil, where over a quarter of parents were involved in either the Parents Association and/or BOM, very few respondents were members of the Parents Association and/or the BOM. Like those in Wyness's (1996 p.139) study, there was a spectrum of opinion, which "flowed from a reticence to get involved – they had neither the time nor the inclination – to a complete rejection of the principle of parental intrusion into the school". Most of the respondents were like the parents in the research done by Vincent (2001 p.251). While they monitored their children's learning carefully, perhaps even questioned some of the school's policies, they were not prepared to challenge the school directly or take action unless it affected their own children's education.

Like those in other research (Hanafin and Lynch 2002 p.40; Mulkerrins 2005 pp.113-4), most respondents felt that parents had very little say over school related

events and policies (Figure 1.34 p.173). However, home-school relationships and communication influenced their perceptions. Frequent attendees and volunteers (Table 1.43 p.176) felt more included in the decision-making processes. In addition, parents who read the notes sent home (Table 1.45 p.177) and spoke to the teacher regularly tended to feel more included in the school organisation. Active participation, it appears, fosters inclusion and partnership. It was interesting that members of the Parents Association felt that they had more of a say in the operation of the school than BOM members (Table 1.44 p.176). The limited representation of parents and the more formal structures of the BOM may undermine the parents' contributions to the decision-making processes.

The lack of school-based structures means that parents' voices are not included in the decision-making and planning process in a systematic and continuous way (DES 2006b p.80). While those interviewed gave examples of the parent body being consulted on issues such as uniforms and healthy lunches, most respondents felt that they had little say even in those decisions. Normal practice, according to my observations as SDPS facilitator and the DES's research on school planning (DES 2006b; DES 2006c), is for teachers to discuss and agree on policies, which are then disseminated to parents as appropriate. Most of those interviewed felt that they would comment on policies sent home by the school but that they "just never get the opportunity really" (I3MM). It appears that while schools may consult with parents on particular issues, it is not systematic enough to allow the parent body as a whole to express their opinions on a variety of issues at regular intervals (DES 2006b p.80).

Some respondents suggested that their lack of involvement in school governance was their own fault because they had not got involved with either the BOM or the Parents Association. However, there was also a recognition from even the most involved parents in this study that certain issues, such as curriculum implementation, were off limits (DES 2006b p.81) and that often lip-service was paid to their suggestions. In addition, they tended, like the school boards and governing bodies in Munn's (1998 p.388) study, to be guided by the expertise of the principal. The fear of being 'wrong' and/or appearing 'stupid' (FG2M) held them back from both expressing their views and insisting that their ideas be implemented in the school.

Nevertheless, most respondents felt that they could make a complaint (Figure 1.24 p.155) and were quite happy to deal with issues that arose on an individual basis with either the class teacher or the principal. They did not appear to agree with the

parents in Mulkerrins' study (2005 pp.113-4) that the schools "exploited, manipulated and patronised them and rarely consulted with them in a meaningful way". It appears that parents in this study, like many Irish citizens, prefer to rely on individual representation rather than collective action to address their grievances (O' Sullivan 1992 p.466; Keohane and Kuhling 2004 p.50; O'Halloran 2004 p.22). While this approach was very effective for parents as individuals, it may have curbed collective involvement in the Parents Association, BOM and other school activities.

In Irish politics there is a relationship between the sense of economic well-being of the electorate and the popularity of the government (Mair 1992 p.376; Smith 2004 p.512). The same may be true of the parents in this research. The majority were satisfied with the schools and felt that the teachers were doing a good job. Like the parents in Coleman's (1998 p.147) research in England, they were conscious of the difficulties teachers face daily and were reluctant to interfere as long as they were happy that the teacher was "sort of competent and up to the job" (I4MF). Happy as long as they felt that their children's learning needs were being met, they were not interested in getting involved with decision-making processes within the school. While they may have privately questioned some of the schools' decisions and practices, very few were prepared to challenge the schools (Vincent 2001 p.351) unless it concerned their own child. In these cases, individual representation (O' Sullivan 1992 p.466; O'Halloran 2004 p.22) was perceived as being the most effective way to address their grievances. If that failed they were prepared either to move their child to another school or supplement the school's provision by helping the child at home or paying for grinds (Reay 1998 p.67). This is in line with the 'individualistic consumerism' (Bottery 2005 p.277) of modern society.

The clientelist relationship in Irish society between politicians and citizens was reflected in the relationship parents had with the school. All the parents had easy access to the principal and expected that their concerns would be listened to and dealt with. From the principal's point of view, they were in touch with the views of parents and got feedback on the organisation of the school. Its disadvantage was that the emphasis was on individual specific issues rather than on whole school policies and approaches. It also prioritised day-to-day rather than long-term issues. This is similar to the participants in the YES (Your Education System) process, who found it difficult to shift their perspectives from their immediate concerns to the longer-term view of the development of education system (Kellaghan and McGee 2005 p.21). They also tended to focus on the

needs of a particular sector or group of students rather than the needs of the system as a whole.

7.6.3 Factors Influencing Parental involvement in their Children's Schools

Being an active citizen implies that one is an aware and responsible member of a community (Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007c p.1). Active citizens support and get involved in community activities along with playing their part in making decisions on issues that affect themselves and others. The findings of this research are very similar to the statistical evidence available about active citizenship in Ireland (Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007b) both in relation to volunteering and participants' attitudes towards decision-making.

At the centre of what it means to be an active citizen in a democracy, according to the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007a p.11), are values, conversations and belonging. While respondents cited lack of time and energy as being the reason why parents did not get involved with their children's schools, analysis of the questionnaires illustrated the impact of shared values and norms in the social networks that surround the school. The parents who shared the Catholic values of the school were not only more involved (Table 1.25 p.129), but were also more likely to feel that they had a say in the decision-making and governance structures within the school (Table 1.42 p.175). There was no difference between the middle class and disadvantaged schools in this respect. The parents who were most involved in each of the schools attended church weekly. This is not an isolated finding. Research has consistently shown that there is clear evidence of higher involvement and volunteering among the more frequent church-goers (Putnam 2000 p.67; Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007b p.15).

Those who did not share the educational values of the school and had lower levels of education (Donaghue 2002 p.62; Putnam 2004; Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007b p.6) were also 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002; Allen 2003 p.120). Respondents who had only a primary education were the least likely to access support from any source, even the class teacher (Table 1.18 p.116). This detachment from society was reflected in their lack of involvement in school activities (Table 1.47 p.181). Not alone did those with lower educational qualifications not volunteer for various activities both inside and outside the school, they were also the least likely to attend the 'set pieces' (I4MF) such as parent-teacher meetings and school events. Their self-confidence to engage with the education system may be diminished by their own

negative experience of the education system and 'the fear they felt in school' (Ryan 1994 p.135; Zappone 2002 p.34). In addition, their lower 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) may mean that these parents do not have the knowledge and language to discuss their children's education with more educated professionals (Coleman 1998; Eden 2001 p.98).

Interestingly, lone parents, who do not conform to the norm of a 'good' Catholic family, also appeared to be 'marginalised' (Ryan 1994 p.199; Mac Giolla Phádraig 2005 p.64). They had lower social capital and were less likely to get involved in school activities (Table 1.49 p.182). Of course, lack of time (Servon 2003 p.14) and childcare may be the reason rather than 'feelings of difference' (Bell and Ribbens 1994 p.252). Without a partner to share the tasks involved with parenting, it is difficult to access courses and activities, particularly if they are held outside school hours.

The concern expressed by some that getting involved in school activities would be 'like walking in to a clique' (I8DM) appears justified. Social capital perpetuated exclusivity and a social network in these schools in which identity determined membership (Servon 2003 p.16; Healy 2004 p.6). However, there is no evidence to suggest that the schools were deliberately excluding other parents (Lodge 2004 p.27). It seems as if assumptions about the homogeneity of Irish society (Devine *et al.* 2004 p.246) and the continuous reinforcement of collective beliefs (Bourdieu 1977b) by the schools sent implicit messages on the requirements for active parental involvement in the school. As Healy (2004 p.12) suggested, the 'rules of engagement' *(his apostrophes)* were 'informal, tacit and possibly not even consciously acknowledged or codified'.

Both the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007b p.5) and the CSO (2007b p.29) noted also gender differences in the pattern of engagement with community groups. Women were more involved in Church, charitable and community/resident associations, while men tended to be involved more in sports and political organisations. This was reflected in my observations of my children's extra-curricular activities with fathers being more involved in their children's sporting activities. The fathers in Doucet's (2006 p.700) study were similar. Like the grandfather in this research, they felt uncomfortable in women-centred venues such as playgrounds and schools, where they felt mothers were keeping a suspicious 'watchful eye on them' (Doucet 2006 p.703). From my observations, fathers have to engage in consistent self-monitoring when children are in their care so that they are not leaving themselves open to accusations of child abuse

(Corcoran 2005 p.147). This makes them reluctant to get involved in school activities, especially in girls' schools (I2DG).

Fathers' working time arrangements may have meant that they had less time and were not available during the school-day when many of these activities take place. The CSO (2007b p.26) found that men left much earlier for work with women dominating the time slots between 8 and 9am. Similarly, fathers in this study were less likely to attend school events such as plays, concerts, games and parent-teacher meetings, which are held during the day. However, there were no significant gender differences in attendance at the school activities, which were held at night. Fathers were also as likely as mothers to be involved in helping out in the school, especially in organising the fundraising and other events. However, they were less likely to help out in the classroom. Interestingly, the men who were interviewed had different perspectives on parental involvement than mothers. They felt that parents, not having the 'big picture' (I2DG), should leave the school alone to get on with the job of educating their children. While parents should support the school at home, they should only approach the school if they felt that the child was experiencing difficulties or if the teacher was incompetent and not doing their job (I4MF).

Like in the NCCA's (2005 p.206) research, the disadvantaged parents were more likely to help out in the school and the classroom (Table 1.46 p.180). It appears that the HSCL scheme may have made a difference to the involvement of parents as volunteers and audiences in these schools. However, middle class parents were more likely to organise fundraising and other events in the school. They also attended activities run by the Parents Association more frequently (Table 1.46 p.180). While these activities, as the NCCA (2005 p.208) suggested, may "not involve parents being in regular contact with the class teacher and learning from him/her about new ways of supporting children's own learning", their wider support network outside the school may have compensated for their lack of involvement in the school.

There was little difference between the schools in the involvement of parents in their decision making processes. In fact, the parents in the middle class schools could be said to have more of a say as they were more likely to help organise school events. Involving parents in school decision-making and governance is not one of the aims of the HSCL schemes (DES 1999d) nor is it a priority with the HSCL coordinators (Archer and Shortt 2003 p.61). The HSCL programme appears to concentrate on 'service

delivery' (Fine 1997 p.464) and 'changing parenting practices' (Vincent 2000; Clarke 2006 p.701).

As the SDPS facilitator for the schools, I was involved in helping the two boys' schools draw up three year plans. Both schools sent out a questionnaire to all parents asking them to review what was working well and what changes and improvements they felt were needed in the school. While the replies from the parents were similar, the principal of the disadvantaged school organised the questionnaire and parents did not attend the planning day. In contrast, the Parents Association organised the questionnaire in the middle class school and three parents attended the planning day. At the end of the day, one parent checked that the parents' priorities were addressed. This ensured that parents were not dependent on the goodwill of the teaching staff to ensure that their views and issues were taken into consideration. It appears that a Parents Association may be a more effective way of ensuring that parents are represented and have a voice than a HSCL teacher.

As other research (Donaghue 2002 p.69; Mac Giolla Phádraig 2005 p.62; Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2006b p.5) found, older parents were more likely to volunteer to help out in school activities (Table 1.51 p.183). Having been involved with the education system for longer, they have accumulated knowledge over the years and may have seen the benefits of parental involvement. They may also have internalised the norms for being a 'good' parent and may feel guilty that they did not get involved sooner. Having resisted the calls for help in the junior classes when child care was more of an issue, they may now have the time and the inclination to get involved. They may also have become aware of the educational capital that other parents accrued by being involved in school activities.

Unlike other research, (Ryan 1994 p.26; Murphy 2002 pp.88-90; DES 2005a p.63; NCCA 2005 p.208), parents in this study, who had children in second and fourth classes, were the most active in helping out in the school (Table 1.52 p.183). If parents are targeted by the Parents Associations and the HSCL coordinators as they enrol their children in the school, it is surprising that so few senior infant parents are involved. It may be that at second class, parents are much more familiar with the school, know the staff and have made friends with other parents. This increases their self-confidence to get involved. In addition, their children will be in the school for another four years and will reap the benefits of their efforts. In sixth class, the children are moving on to secondary school so parents have little incentive to get involved. As they were also less

likely to talk to other parents about the school, it appears as if they have disengaged from the school and its community.

Parents of only children were less interested in getting involved in school activities (Table 1.50 p.182). This may be because their engagement with the school is of a shorter time-frame than that of larger families. As their contribution may not benefit their own child (I3MM), their vested interest in the schools may be less than those with larger families. In their 'cost-benefit calculus' (Servon 2003 p.18) it may appear that engaging in the home curriculum is more beneficial to their child. Time may also be an issue as parents with only one child were more likely to be in one-parent families and paid employment. It is unclear whether this is a life style stage or an indication of a move towards egalitarian individualism and consumerism in Irish society.

7.6.4 Summary

Parents were more likely to attend parent-teacher meetings and school events than get involved with helping out in the school and classroom. While they may be consulted about various issues, very few parents felt that they were involved in the school decision-making and governance processes. Parents who were most active in attending school events, volunteering and communicating with the school tended to feel that they had more of a say in the operation of the school.

There were differences between the results of the questionnaires and the responses of those interviewed as to why parents did not get involved with the school. The interviewees' explanations, which included other commitments and the fear of the group being a clique, were applicable to all social groupings. There was little recognition of the 'other' groups, particularly those whose values differ from those of the norm (Lynch and Lodge 2002). The questionnaires highlighted unacknowledged patterns of involvement. Those who lacked the Catholic and educational values of the school were the least likely to be involved. They also identified how, as Gorard (1997 p.198) pointed out, that parents behaved differently according to the age and size of their family.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter looked at parental involvement in the education system at both national and local level. At national level, participants had little understanding of the partnership process. They felt that the State and the DES made all the important

educational decisions. Parents, they felt, had little influence on these decisions. While supportive of the Catholic ethos of the school, they were ambiguous about the role of the Church in school governance. In general, they were quite passive about the education system. While wishing that the State would put more resources in to the system, they accepted it for what it is and did what they could for their own children. Most felt that there was little point in protesting as their issues would not be addressed.

Parents were very aware of their responsibilities under the *Education Welfare Act 2000,* mainly because of the work of the NEWB and the schools. They were less aware of their rights under the *Education Act 1998* and the introduction of the revised curriculum. There is no systematic effort made at national level to inform parents of the curriculum and their entitlements in relation to the education system. Respondents' educational capital appears to increase the longer they are engaged with the system. Social class and education qualifications also impacted on the educational capital of the respondents.

While the majority of the research respondents felt that they had a very good relationship with the school, there was a power dynamic (Reay 1998 p.71) at play. Some felt very uncomfortable entering the professional territory of the teachers. While parents, in general, felt that they could make a complaint, they were very careful to manage this process so that they did not damage their relationship with the school. Some, who had raised issues, felt that their concerns had not been listened to or addressed. While good home-school communication had a positive impact, participants who adhered to the schools' educational and religious values had a better rapport with the school. Gender influenced the respondents' perceptions of the home-school relationship. Men saw the school as a service provider, while women saw it as an extension of their mothering work and had a more personal relationship with it.

Home-school communication mainly focused on information about events and requests for money. While occasionally parents acted as an advocate for their children, curriculum issues were rarely addressed. Written communication was the preferred means of communication with the school sending home notes at least once or twice a week. Disadvantaged parents and those with children in the junior classes met the teacher more frequently. The power differential was obvious in communication between home and school with the school controlling parents' access to information about their children.

While most parents attended parent-teacher meetings and school events, only a minority got involved in volunteering and governance. This minority, unlike other parents, were more likely to perceive that they had a say in school decisions and policies. Lack of time and fear of cliques were the reasons given by the interviewees as to why parents did not get involved in the school more. However, from the questionnaires, it appeared that those who do not conform to the religious and educational norms of the school were less likely to be involved. Gender influenced both how participants got involved in the school and their views on 'appropriate' parental involvement in their children's schooling. While parents in the disadvantaged schools were more likely to help out in the school, they were less likely to organise school events and fundraising. This may have given them less of a say in school decisions. Older parents with larger families were the most likely to be involved as volunteers and decision-makers.

Chapter Eight Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This case study evaluated the implementation of national policy of home-school partnership in five primary schools in North Dublin. The policy aspirations, as outlined in the *Education Act 1998*, the *Education Welfare Act 2000* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1999a) and other documentation, was compared with the perceptions and experience of parents whose children attended these schools. The following four indicators were used to explore how the participants were involved in their children's education, both at home and at school:

- Open, caring, respectful relationships
- Home-school communication
- Parental involvement in the home curriculum
- Parental involvement in the school

These four indicators match the 'actual policy' (Crump 1992 p.419) as outlined in *Looking at our Schools* (DES 2003b) (Table 1.3 p.49) and the categories of parental involvement, as identified by the literature (Epstein 1992 p.1145; Esptein and Seyong 1995 p.122; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 1997 p.19). These are detailed in Chapter Two. These indicators, while very suitable for exploring parental involvement in their children's education, limited partnership to that of a relationship between individual parents and the school. They omitted the role of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) and national policy for involving parents in the education system as a whole.

The following research questions, which are outlined in more detail in the summaries in Chapters One and Two and in section one of Chapter Three, were devised using these indicators:

- How were case study participants involved in their children's education both at home and in school?
- What kind of a relationship did participants have with the school?
- What type of home-school communication system existed?

As the policy was implemented differently in middle class and disadvantaged schools, the following variables were also explored:

- What difference did social class make to parental involvement in their children's education?

- What influence had other variables, such as family status, religion, gender, age, on parental involvement both at home and school?

The overall research question asked:

- How was the national policy of partnership between parents, schools and teachers in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school being implemented in these schools?

Five schools, three middle class and two disadvantaged, were chosen to participate from the database of schools I worked with as a School Development Planning Support (SDPS) facilitator. One of the middle class schools was the local school, which my daughters attended. It was used to develop the research questions and to supplement the data from the other four schools.

As described in Chapter Three, triangulation (Wolff *et al.* 1993 p.130) clarified the ways parents were involved in their children's education. Participant observation (Appendix Two p.262), through my roles as a parent and as a SDPS facilitator, gave me an introduction to the local language, the daily routines and the power structures (Kvale 1996 p.96). It allowed me to formulate relevant research questions and ensure that I had a sense of what the participants in this research were talking about. Structured observations of my own interactions with my children and their school were used to supplement the data from the other research methods. Questionnaires (Appendix Three p.267) were used to examine the knowledge, beliefs and behaviour of a large number of parents in four of the case study schools. Interviews and focus groups (Appendix Four p. 290) were used to supplement the information from the questionnaires and to gather more in-depth information about parents' attitudes to and involvement in their children's education and schooling.

The research findings were outlined in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four outlined the involvement of parents in their children's education at home. It looked at the profiles of the participants, their perceptions of parental responsibilities and the social capital that they had amassed to support them in educating their children. Parental aspirations for their children, along with their decision-making processes, were also examined. Finally, the home curriculum and the ways parents supported the school at home were explored. These results were discussed in Chapter Six. Chapter Five described parental involvement in their children's schooling at local level. Participants' perceptions and knowledge of the stakeholders, policy, legislation and curriculum at national level were probed. The home-school relationship, along with the communication systems used to build and maintain this relationship, were also explored. Finally, parental

involvement in the school as audiences, volunteers and decision-makers was examined. These findings were discussed in Chapter Seven.

This chapter explores the themes as developed in Chapter One in the context of findings from this research. Home-school relationships and communication systems underpin each of the themes. Section one examines the role that parents play in their children's education. It focuses on what the participants perceived as their priorities. Section two discusses the values and identities of the participants and the impact they have on their involvement in their children's education. The implementation of the national policy of home-school partnership is evaluated in section three. The implications of the research findings for national policy are outlined. Section four summarises the conclusions from this research, while the recommendations for home-school partnership at both local and national level is outlined in section five.

As this is a case study consisting of five schools, its results cannot be generalised to the school population as a whole. However, as outlined in Chapter 6, the results will be compared with other research findings in the same area (Yin 2000).

8.2 Parental Involvement in their Children's Education

In Chapter One, four broad headings were used for the purposes of this research to describe the parents' role in their children's education. They were educator, supporter, consumer and welfare recipient. Parents do not consciously choose their preferred role. Most of the time, they operate at an instinctive level while choosing a role that meets their perceived needs. Their identities and values, which are examined in section two, implicitly influence the stance they take on their children's education.

Educators lead and manage their children's learning as they proceed through the education system. They will ensure that the school complements their home curriculum. Supporters perceive their role as solely supporting the work of the school and will follow the school's agenda unless it impacts adversely on their children's well-being. Consumers, on the other hand, choose and pay for an educational service, which they will monitor to ensure that it is meeting their children's needs. Finally, the welfare recipients are dependent on the school and the State to help them meet their children's educational needs. They lack the confidence and the skills to question the school's provision for their children. In practice, these roles are intertwined as parents pragmatically adopt the one that best meets their children's learning needs and their own immediate interests. This

section examines the participants' involvement in their children's education both at home and school using these descriptors. Their relationship with the school, in particular their method of communication, is also explored.

8.2.1 Educators

The majority of the participants perceived themselves as educators and they were heavily involved in their children's education. As seen in Chapter Four, most of this work took place incidentally at home through the home curriculum. They read to their children, played games with them, took them on outings and enrolled them in a variety of extra-curricular activities. Educators also took their responsibilities for 'cooperating with and supporting the school' (Department of Education 1995 p.9; 1996 p.14, Commission on the Family 1998 p.284) seriously. They ensured that their children attended school and conformed to the school rules. While educators regarded their children's formal education as a collaborative effort between home and school, they felt that it was too important to leave to teachers, particularly if their children were to realise their 'full potential' (DES 1999a p.7) in the education system. These parents fulfilled their 'special role' (Department of Education 1995 p.9; 1996 p.14, Commission on the Family 1998 p.284) by monitoring the work of the school (Figure 1.16 p.136) and by supplementing it, if necessary, at home.

Parents' 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) was a vital asset in this role. Educators used it to monitor their children's progress and their schools, both present and future, and ensure that their children's academic and social needs were being met. Cultural capital was accumulated through informal networks, involvement in school activities, developing their human capital through parenting courses (Schultz 1977 p.318) and accessing information through the media. Personal contact, especially with those whose opinions they trusted, was perceived as the most effective source of information. In this way, educators acquired the knowledge and confidence to deal with the education system.

Educators had a sense of entitlement (Vincent 2001 p.348; Reay 1998 p.70) in relation to their constitutional prerogative as the primary educators of their children (Ireland 1937). They had no problem taking action in order to enhance their children's opportunities or if they felt that their children's needs were not being met at school. This included seeking additional support for their children at school, supplementing the work of the school at home and/or paying for grinds or extra-curricular activities. Though

educators choose 'approachable' schools in order to ensure that their concerns would be listened to, they were also prepared to change schools if the school did not respond to their complaints. They had the confidence and knowledge to engage with the education system and ensure that it met their children's educational needs (Reay 1998 p.70)

As can be seen from the above, there was a consensus between the DES (Department of Education 1995 p.9) and the educators in this research as to the role of parents in their children's education. There was also agreement around the goals of education. Educators' hopes for their children were very much in line with the DES's mission statement (Department of Education 1995 p.193) While they wished their children to develop into happy, well-behaved citizens, educators also wanted their children to go to college and get a 'good job' (I7DM).

Educators saw themselves as the 'primary educators' (Ireland 1937) of their children and were uneasy about the present partnership processes. They felt that the present structures needed to be improved to allow 'the systematic and continuous involvement of parents in the planning process' (DES 2006b p.80), particularly in relation to curricular changes and their children's progress.

8.2.2 Supporters

All the parents in this research supported their children's schools, though some were more active than others. They felt responsible for ensuring that their children attended school, wore the correct uniform and had the appropriate books, pencils and copies (Figure 1.1 p.98). In addition, most parents supported the school ethos and rules publicly, if not privately, and felt that their children should obey their teachers (Figure 1.14 p.133). They also contributed to the schools' fundraising efforts, helped their children with homework and attended parent-teacher meetings and other school events. By complying with these practices or 'rituals' (Durkeim 1971 p.44), supporters fulfilled the basic requirement for being a 'good' parent as defined by the DES and Irish society (Table 1.2 p.47).

Most parents, due to work and other commitments, were silent supporters (Figure 1.33 p.172). They helped their child at home, but remained detached from the school. The more active supporters, who helped out in the school or got involved in school governance, only did so when asked by the school or when they thought it might benefit their child's education. In some cases, 'support' could be defined as an extension of the educator role. Involvement was used to improve their educational capital and ensure that

their concerns were addressed (Cullingford 1996a p.12; Graue *et al.* 2001 p.18; Vincent 2001 p.357).

Supporters had a good relationship with the school and were confident that their issues would be addressed. However, they also accepted the *status quo* and recognised that the school would not always be able to meet their demands. While attempts to modify the school's provision in relation to their own children met with mixed results, supporters were very reluctant to change schools. They applied the 'good enough' standard to schools (Furstenberg *et al.* 1999 pp.225-6) and focused on the here and now rather than the future.

Supporters relied on the school to educate their children and saw no reason to intervene unless there was a problem. Being aware of the difficulties teachers faced daily, they valued and appreciated their work. They were quite happy with the partnership model as outlined by the DES (Department of Education 1994 p.5), Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO 1997) and the Catholic Primary School Managers' Association (CPMSA 2004 p.17), whereby professional and financial matters relating to the school were left to the BOM and the teachers.

8.2.3 Consumers

'Consumers' are those whose 'prime investment' (Wolfendale 1996 p.35) in their own children takes precedence. They view the school as a service provider and see no reason to get involved with its activities unless it directly benefits their own children. Being aware of the quality and cost of the service provided, consumers will complain if it is not delivered as promised.

Participants in this research, whether they liked it or not, had to act as consumers in order to supplement the education system. All parents paid for school items (Figure 1.18 p.138) along with regularly contributing to the schools' fundraising efforts. They also supplemented the school curriculum at home by paying for extra-curricular activities and, when necessary, for grinds. Some participants were resentful when the school refused to provide additional support for their children, leaving them with little choice but to augment the schools' provision out of their own resources.

Like many other consumers, parents planned their children's education from an early age and were active choosers when deciding on their children's schools. However, this could be seen as an extension of their 'educator' role. Despite the information deficit (Oplatka 2004 p.153; Kellaghan and McGee 2005 p.15), parents used their social capital

(Bourdieu 1997 p.51) to find a school with a good reputation. If their choice of school was not meeting their children's needs, they were prepared to move their children to another school.

Consumers prefer to pay others to do the decision-making and the work rather than get personally involved (Irvin and Stansbury 2004 pp.58-9). Many parents in the research held similar attitudes towards their involvement in the school. They did not get involved unless there were 'tangible benefits' (National Centre for Partnership and Performance [NCPP] 2002 p.32) to their own children. They were unconcerned about being excluded from the decision-making processes as they felt that they could use the complaint procedure if necessary. This was done on an individual rather than a collective basis. Consumers favoured the DES's (1998a; 1998b; 2005c) partnership model, where parents are clients and customers of both the schools and the DES and can expect to be provided with a quality service.

8.2.4 Welfare Recipients

The term 'welfare recipient' appeared initially to be inappropriate in this research as most parents took responsibility for and got involved in their children's education. There was no evidence that the constant stream of expert advice on how to be a 'good' parent undermined their confidence or made them dependent on outside professionals (Pugh and De'Ath 1984 p.197; Mc Keown *et al.* 1998 p.80; Hargreaves 2000 p.220; Dennis 2002 p.12). In fact, very few relied on the professional services, apart from the class teachers, for support and advice in rearing and educating their children (Table 1.15 p.111). Opinion was equally divided over whether children's education should be left to the teachers as the 'experts' (Figure 1.5 p.114). While most perceived their children's education to be a collaborative effort, a minority felt that teachers were solely responsible for children's numeracy, literacy and socialisation skills (Figure 1.1 p.98).

However, most were welfare recipients in their acceptance of 'public patriarchy' (Walby 1994), whereby the State took responsibility for children's education. All the participants availed of the State education system and depended on the State to provide resources, define the curriculum and ensure standards in the schools. While they were critical of the State's failures in this regard, participants saw no role for themselves in changing national policy. They were unaware of the partnership process, in particular the role of National Parents' Council Primary (NPCP), at national level. As far as the

research respondents were concerned, national education policy, particularly the curriculum, was determined by the DES and therefore off-limits to parents.

Parents were also dependent on the school for information about their children's progress, the curriculum and national education policy. This was compounded by the practices of the NPCP and other national agencies to use the school as a means of communicating with parents. Much of this communication did not reach parents (Kilfeather 2003). This information deficit left a lot of parents unaware of their rights and the curriculum being taught in the schools. Some used their social capital (Bourdieu 1997 p.51) to access this information from other parents and 'teacher' friends. Others used the media, the Internet and parenting courses to keep themselves informed. However, there were others who were quite happy to depend on the school. As welfare recipients, these parents wondered if they needed to know more about national policy and the curriculum, especially if the teachers looked as if they knew what they were doing and the school appeared to be a happy, ordered place (Taylor 1997 p.119).

Most participants, even those who acted as educators in the home, tended to act as welfare recipients in the school. Preserving the home-school relationship took precedence over asserting their parental rights. These parents felt uncomfortable entering the professional territory of the teachers and were very aware of the power differential (Reay 1998) with most believing that they had very little say over school activities and policies (Figure 1.34 p.173). As welfare recipients, parents were inclined to be 'passive' (Hilliard 2003) and conform to the norms of the school unless the issue impacted directly on their own children. Some of those who did complain felt that their concerns were either shelved or dismissed. This minority were angry that they had to fight for services to which they felt, based on their observations of their children's needs and progress, their children were entitled. It appears from this research that the implicit message that parents got from the State and schools was that their children's formal education was to be left solely to the teachers who were the experts.

8.2.5 Summary

These headings: educator, supporter, consumer and welfare recipient, proved very useful in describing parental involvement in their children's education. Not only did they uncover the underlying motivations of parents, they also illustrated how these motivations influenced parental actions, particularly their interactions with their children's schools.

Parents tended to act as educators at home and welfare recipients at school. Even though they supplemented the school's funding, the information deficit made it difficult for them to act as consumers in the true sense of the word. Most parents complied with the expectations of the State and supported the work of the school. The majority were passive, while a few were actively involved in their children's schools. This was mainly on an individual basis with parents primarily focused on the benefits to their own children.

8.3 Influence of parental identities and values

While on the surface, most of the participants appeared to belong to the dominant 'status group' (Collins 1977 p.125) which was white, Catholic and Irish, they were not homogenous. The way they got involved in their children's education reflected the increasing diversity of Irish society and the changing cultural and social norms. Chapter One examined the impact of the citizenship, social class, gender, religion and other family factors on parents and their identities as individuals. This section explores the influence of these factors on the respondents in this research.

8.3.1 Citizenship

Nearly all the respondents were Irish citizens and this was reflected in their attitude towards the school. Like the relationship between citizens and the political parties (Mair 1992 p.376; Smith 2004 p.512), there was a strong link between perceptions of children's social and academic well-being and the popularity of the school. Once they felt that their children were happy and learning, parents were satisfied to let the teachers get on with it. As with the findings of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007b) and the 2006 Census (Central Statistics Office [CSO] 2007b p.29), only a minority were willing to get involved with the school (Figure 1.33 p.172). Older parents and frequent church-goers were the most likely to volunteer, while those with lower levels of education were the least likely to get involved (Tables 1.47; 1.48; 1.50 pp.181-3).

Like with politicians, parents had easy access to the principal and the teachers. Most had no problem talking to the teachers and felt that they were listened to (Figure 1.28 p.165). This tradition of clientelism (Keohane and Kuhling 2005 p.50) meant that parents were quite happy to rely on individual representation rather than collective action

to address their grievances (O' Sullivan 1992 p.466; O'Halloran 2004 p.22). Like those who participated in the Your Education System (YES) process (Kellaghan and McGee 2005 p.21), parents' focused on their own immediate personal concerns rather than long-term whole school priorities. This may be a reflection of the increase in consumerism in society.

Traces of the past, when the power of both Church and State inhibited questioning and dissent (Hilliard 2003 p.31), were also apparent. Most parents accepted the school rules and believed that children should obey their teachers (Figure 1.14 p.133). Fully aware that they were dependent on the school to educate their children, they felt uncomfortable questioning the school's approach for fear of alienating the teachers. A minority who had raised issues with the school found it difficult to get their concerns addressed. Unlike at national level, there was no systematic approach to involving parents in decision-making at local level (DES 2006b p.80). Only a small minority were involved with the Parents Association and the Board of Management (BOM) and even these felt that certain areas such as curriculum were out-of-bounds.

Some parents preferred to phone the DES before approaching the school. This, as Keohane and Kuhling (2004 p.51) argued, may be seen as the emergence of modernisation, where the principles of accountability and transparency are chosen over the tradition of clientelism and brokerage. It was also perceived as a neutral way of accessing power/knowledge that ensures that the relationship with the school is maintained and that their concerns are addressed.

8.3.2 Gender

The tensions between traditional patriarchal familism policy paradigm and the more modern egalitarian individualism (Fahey 1998) were apparent in this research. While participants, especially those in two-parent families, accepted that fathers had a responsibility for their children's education (Figure 1.3 p.103), there were mixed views on how willing fathers were to accept this responsibility. Family forms, social class along with employment and education levels influenced these views (Tables 1.12; 1.13; 1.14 pp.102-3) with over half the respondents to the questionnaires feeling that mothers were primarily responsible for their children's education (Figure 1.2 p.101).

The fathers who participated in this research felt just as responsible for their children's education as the mothers. However, as other researchers (Reay 1998 p.60; O'Brien 2005 p.239; Hearn 2002 p.260, Graue *et al.* 2001) suggested, mothers appeared

to be more involved in the day-to-day business of educating their children. They were more likely to monitor their school work and network with other parents and the principal (Table 1.34 p.158). This is similar to other research, which found that mothers did the majority of networking, with fathers playing a more marginal role (Finch and Mason 1993 p.176; Bell and Ribbens 1994 p.238; McNamara Horvat *et al.* 2003 p.14). However, it was suggested that fathers might find it difficult to fit into these mother-dominated networks, especially when they are viewed suspiciously (Doucet 2006 p.704).

In addition, fathers had a different attitude to school than mothers. They were more inclined to view it as a service provider where one did not get involved unless there was a problem. Mothers, on the other hand, perceived the role of the teacher and parent to be complementary and felt that a supportive home-school relationship benefited their children. Employment levels, along with traditional views of the appropriate gender roles, appeared to influence the involvement of fathers in their children's education. However, they perceived an increased role for themselves in supplementing the work of the school as their children grew older.

8.3.3 Social Class

As stated in Chapter One, social class was determined by the school the respondents' children attended. Both the disadvantaged schools in this research were in DEIS Band 1 Urban, which meant that they were two of the 150 Irish primary schools with the highest level of disadvantage (DES 2005d p.78). The parents in the middle class schools were more likely to be in two-parent families, paid employment and have third level qualifications (Table 1.6 p.93). The majority of fathers who responded to the questionnaire were from the middle class schools.

Other research found that middle class parents had a better relationship with the school than disadvantaged parents (Lareau 1997 p.709; Hanafin and Lynch 2002 p.41). This was not evident in this research. The majority of respondents, regardless of what school their children attended, had a good relationship with the teachers (Figure 1.24 p.155). Adherence to the Catholic values of the school and active engagement with the school had more influence on home-school relationships than social class (Tables 1.35; 1.36; 1.37; 1.38; 1.39; 1.40 pp.159-66).

There was also nothing to indicate that middle class parents were treated more favourably than disadvantaged parents. While a minority of parents found it difficult to approach teachers or make a complaint, this was not confined to any one type of school.

In fact, the disadvantaged parents appeared to have more frequent contact with the school. They talked to the teacher more often (Table 1.40 p.166) and were more likely to help out in the classroom and school (Table 1.46 p.180). This was similar to Reay's (1998 p.62) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) (2005 p.206) findings. It appears that the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme may have made a difference to both the involvement of parents as audiences and volunteers in these disadvantaged schools. However, it could be said that middle class parents were more involved in the decision-making processes as they were more involved in organising school events.

Social class did have an influence on the respondents' 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47), parenting practices and their aspirations for their children. Not only did middle class parents have the financial capital to supplement the work of the school, they also had more educational capital and a wider support network (Figure 1.5 p.114; Tables 1.17p. 115; 1.31 p.153). Disadvantaged parents appeared to favour the traditional 'responsible' parent (Wyness 1996 p.14). While having the same aspirations as middle class parents, they had very specific fears about the influence of the 'street' on their children's educational prospects. Like those in Furstenberg *et al.*'s (1999) study, disadvantaged parents employed a range of preventative strategies to reduce their children's exposure to various types of dangerous circumstances. These included a high degree of monitoring their children's behaviour and that of their friends. However, they tended to adopt a more 'wait-and-see' fatalism about their children's education (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995 p.44). Middle class parents, in contrast, favoured the sensitive supportive parent (Dix 1991). They had implicit flexible rules and elaborate code of communication and negotiation (De Regt and Weenink 2005 pp.60-3). Their fears for their children were very vague and they actively shaped their children's educational career from an early age (Reay 2003 p.56).

Nolan and Whelan (1999 p.117) identified two contrasting groups in the literature on disadvantage. One adhered to mainstream norms, while the other is more marginalised. In this study, the group with the lower levels of education appeared to be the most 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002) regardless of what school their children attended. Respondents with higher levels of education perceived their children's education to be a shared enterprise between home and school (Table 1.10 p.100). Not only did they have more social and educational capital (Tables 1.18 p. p. 116; 1.32 p.153), but they were more inclined to attend school events, volunteer as helpers and organisers, and get

involved in decision-making within the school (Table 1.47 p.181). While those with lower levels of education felt more responsibility for their children's education, they also relied more on the teacher in the areas of literacy, numeracy and socialisation (Table 1.11 p.100). They were also the least likely to receive support from any quarter (Table 1.18 p.116). It is unclear whether this was due to their lack of social skills and confidence to engage with the education system or whether they did not share the educational norms and values of the school and other parents. While there is a relationship between educational qualifications and social class (Bourdieu 1977a), it appears that education levels of parents have a far greater impact on parental involvement in their children's education than the parents' social class.

8.3.4 Religious Values

The five schools were under the patronage of the Catholic archbishop of Dublin and three-quarters of the respondents to the questionnaire supported the Catholic values of the school. While it appears that there is considerable support for retaining the Catholic ethos of schools (Fahey 1992a p.257; Commission on the Family 1998 p.548), the degree to which parents adhered to the Catholic ethos influenced their relationship with the school. Practising Catholics felt more welcome in the school (Tables 1.37; 1.38 pp.160-1). They were more involved in school activities (Table 1.48 p.181) and appeared to feel a greater sense of 'entitlement' (Vincent 2001 p.348) to engage with decision-making and governance within the school (Table 1.42 p.175). Practising Catholics were also unusually active social capitalists outside the school (Putnam 2000 p.67) in that they were more likely to be a member of a group and attend talks and classes for parents outside the school (Table 1.16 p.114).

There was no evidence to suggest that those whose values differed from the school were deliberately discriminated against or excluded. However, rituals, such as homework, the sacraments, parents' meetings, confirmed and reinforced the collective norms and values of the school (Durkheim 1971 p.427; Bourdieu 1977b p.176). These permeated the Code of Behaviour, which formed an implicit home-school agreement. In addition, the assumption of homogeneity (Lodge *et al.* 2004 p.5) and the continuation of Church paternalism, whereby the rights and duties of parents, the school and the Church were considered to be complementary (O'Sullivan 1992 p.465), made it difficult for parents to challenge the *status quo*.

Parents' reaction to the power differential (Reay 1998 p.71) varied depending on their relationship with the school. Aware that they lacked the ability to influence the system at national and local level, most parents, as Bourdieu (1977b p.5) suggested, submitted to the norms of the school in order to use them to their advantage. Some, usually those whose values were similar to those of the school, got involved in school activities to increase their educational capital and ensure that their individual concerns were addressed (Coleman 1998 p.24; Garanzine 2000 p.245). Others tended to be passive (Hilliard 2003 p.44) supporters. They accepted things the way they were and ensured that their children conformed to the school ethos and rules. Those, whose complaints were ignored by the school, felt silenced (Devine *et al.* 2004 p.246). Many of those whose beliefs differed from the norm maintained an independent stance from the school and its activities (Vincent 1996 p.149; Hilliard 2003 p.40). Despite privately questioning the Church's role in education, they complied publicly with the Catholic ethos for fear that their children would be ostracised or bullied by other children (Lodge 2004 p.24; Williams 2005 p.55).

8.3.5 Family or Lifestyle Factors

Partnership, as Hornby (2000 p.20) suggested, requires a long-term commitment. The short time-frame that their child is in the system may make it unproductive for parents to get involved. The length of time that change can take may mean that a child has left the school before the changes are implemented. This may be why family-size had such an impact on parental involvement in schools. One-child families focused more on the home curriculum (Table 1.21 p.124) rather than developing social networks (Table 1.20 p.118) and getting involved in the school (Table 1.50 p.182). This, of course, was of immediate benefit to their individual child. One-child families were also less likely to uphold the Catholic ethos of the school and to contribute to the school's fundraising efforts. As most of the parents with only one child were under thirty, it was unclear whether this was a life stage or a generational difference (Putnam 2000). Older parents had more educational capital and similar to other research they were more likely to volunteer with school activities (Table 1.51 p.183) (Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2007b p.5; CSO 2007b p.29).

Parents also behaved differently depending on the gender and age of their children (Gorard 1997 p.189). As in other research girls were more supportive of their parents (Evertsson 2006). Boys were more likely to participate in sport and computers

rather than music, art and dancing. They were also less likely to be brought to church than girls. Respondents with older children in the senior classes and secondary school had more educational capital than those with younger children. With their children moving towards increasing levels of independence and responsibility (Heightman 1992 p.21), they were less involved in networking and the home curriculum. Parents of children in the junior classes, on the other hand, had a wider support network, more contact with the class teacher and a more extensive home curriculum. They were also more likely to help with homework and examine their children's copybooks and workbooks.

As children grow increasingly independent, they may limit their parents' involvement in their education (Edwards and Alldred 2000 p.448). This may be why, contrary to other research (Ryan 1994 p.26; Murphy 2002 pp.88-90; DES 2005a p.63; NCCA 2005 p.208), parents of children in second and fourth classes were more involved with the school (Table 1.52 p.183). It may have been their only way of keeping themselves informed. While realising the advantages of being involved, they may also feel comfortable enough to volunteer their services.

While being a lone parent is not reducible to class-related factors (Nolan and Whelan 1999 p.112), they were also marginalised in that they had less of a social network (Table 1.19 p.117) and were less likely to help out in the school (Table 1.49 p.182). It is not clear whether this was due to them holding different values from the school or because they were particularly 'time-poor' (Van Drenth *et al.* 1999 p.635; Servon 2003 p.14) compared to other parents. However, like in Ho Sui-Chu and Willms's study (1996 p.137), there was no difference in the involvement of lone parents in the home curriculum. In this context, it is interesting that they felt more responsible for their children's education than those in two-parent families who perceived it to be the joint responsibility of both home and school.

8.3.6 Summary

Parents' involvement in their children's education varied according to their values and beliefs. Like most Irish citizens, parents focused on the needs of their own children and preferred to rely on individual representation rather than collective action. Those who supported the religious and educational norms of the school were more likely to get involved with the school. Both gender and family size influenced the participants' involvement in the home curriculum and the school. However, as in other research

(Dronkers 1994 p.186; Craig 2006 p.563; Crozier and Davies 2006 p.681), the participants' educational levels appeared to have a greater influence on their parenting practices than either social class or gender.

8.4 National Policy of Home-School Partnership

The term 'partnership', while generally regarded as a formal agreement between two or more parties that will provide them with mutual benefits (Levin 2004 p.171), can embrace a wide range of concepts. In Chapter One, educational partnership was defined as

> The relationship between parents, the school, the State and the Catholic Church in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school (p.32)

This section examines, from the perspective of parents, the implementation of the national policy of home-school partnership at both local and national level.

8.4.1 Partnership at Local Level

As Skeggs (1994 p.84) suggested, those with the power at local level can decide whether or not to implement policies. There was no evidence to suggest that the case study schools were resistant to the idea of parental involvement. In fact, many participants remarked that the schools had become more approachable and more open to the involvement of parents over the last six years (Table 1.30 p.148). However, it should be recognised that this was just one national policy among a host of others that these schools were required to implement. With most parents quite happy about the amount of involvement they had, especially since the schools were very open to dealing with their individual concerns, there was little incentive for the schools to initiate a major reform of their current practice in this area.

There were differences between the actual policy (Table 1.3 p.49) and the policy-in-use (Crump 1992 p.419) in the schools. The traditional form of silent partnership (Lareau 1997 p.706; Hargreaves 2000 p.220) was most evident in this research. While parents were actively involved in their children's education outside the school, their involvement within the school was limited to clearly defined partnership rituals (Durkheim 1971 p.427). These included helping with homework and attending school events (Figures 1.17 p. 137; 1.32 p.172). Only a minority of parents were active partners

(Figure 1.33 p.172) and felt that they had a say in school events and polices (Figure 1.34 p.173).

Views varied among the participants as to how involved they needed to be in their children's schooling. Most interviewees were fairly happy to maintain their existing individual relationship with their children's teachers and help out occasionally when asked. They were quite willing to leave professional matters to the teachers (INTO 1997 p.9; De Paor 2003 p.167) and were not really interested in getting involved in decision-making and governance.

However, there may have been 'unspoken' (Bourdieu 1977b) forces at work. Analysis of the questionnaires highlighted that those who volunteered shared the religious values of the schools (Table 1.48 p.181). These were more likely to have a better relationship with the school (Tables 1.37; 1.39 pp.160-1) and to feel that they had a say in school events and policies (Table 1.42 p.175). It is not clear why the 'others' did not get involved. Those with different religious values may have either chosen to remain detached from the school or they may not feel 'entitled' (Vincent 2001 p.360) to intervene in the operation of the school. Those with lower levels of education tended to be the most 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002) and may have lacked the confidence and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) to contest the schools' way of doing things.

Home-school communication is an essential element of national policy (Table 1.3 p.49). Written communication appeared to be the preferred means of communication (Figure 1.28 p.165), though parents with children in the disadvantaged schools and junior classes were more likely to talk to the teachers. Most participants were satisfied with the amount of information they received from the school. They felt that they were kept informed of their children's progress and the operation of the school (Figures 1.29; 1.30 pp.167-8). Participants were also very aware of the implications of the *Education Welfare Act 2000* (Figure 1.19 p.148). All the schools had grievance/appeal procedures in place and most respondents felt that they could make a complaint, if necessary (Figure 1.24 p. 155).

However, there were gaps in their knowledge about the *Education Act 1998* and the introduction of the revised curriculum (Figures 1.20; 1.21; 1.23 pp.149-50). While aware of some changes to the curriculum, less than half the respondents knew that the curriculum had been revised. Their knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the BOM was vague and very few knew that they were entitled to see the school's financial accounts. In addition, respondents' understanding of both the concept and the content of

the school plan was limited (Figure 1.22 p.150). While assistance was sought for school activities, there was little evidence that the schools involved parents in organisational and curricular reviews. However, as noted in Chapter Seven, this issue is being addressed due to the disadvantaged schools' obligation to devise a three-year plan as part of the DEIS Action Plan (DES 2005d) and following a Whole School Evaluation (WSE) in the middle class boys' school.

It appears that while the schools kept parents informed of personal local issues, they did not alert them to changes in national policy. It may be, as Furstenberg *et al.* (1999 p.228) suggested, that schools deal with children for such a brief span that they have neither the time nor the resources to keep them informed. Overload is an issue for many schools. In my experience as an SDPS facilitator, schools are too busy keeping up-to-date with the developments in national policy to even consider the needs of parents in relation to these changes. In any case, parents appeared to be more interested in the progress of their own children than in national policy (Moos *et al.* 1998 p.72). However, as Hargreaves (2000 pp.220-21) pointed out, if parents do not understand the changes being made, it is more difficult for them to support their children at home.

Home-school partnership, as it operated in these schools, consisted of parents supporting their children's learning informally at home and teachers providing the formal education at school. As part of this agreement, teachers kept parents informed of their children's progress along with school policies and activities. Parents, for their part, provided the teachers with 'school trained' (Wyness 1996 p.141) children. They also contributed to fundraising and helped out when asked. However, none of the five schools had established a process whereby teachers and parents could engage in structured and continuous dialogue about organisational and curricular policies (DES 2003b; DES 2006b p.80). As a result, parents had little or no influence on the operation of school.

The HSCL scheme in the two disadvantaged schools aims to develop the parents as the primary educator and promote partnership between teachers and parents (Conaty 2002 p.29). The three middle class schools were relying on the efforts of the BOMs, principals and the Parents Associations. It is difficult to assess the difference the HSCL scheme had made to parents using previous evaluations. Feedback is normally obtained from the HSCL teachers and principals and the number of parents who availed of the various supports is not readily available (Archer and Shortt 2003; Conaty 2006b p.131). While it may be that the 'most marginalised' parents (Conaty 2002) did not return their

questionnaires in this research, the HSCL service also acknowledges that it is difficult to elicit a response from these families (Purcell 2006 p.9).

As Archer and Shortt (2003 p.111) found, the HSCL scheme appeared to improve home-school relationships. Parents in the disadvantaged schools had more contact with the teachers and helped out more in the school (Tables 1.40 p.166; 1.46 p.180). However, only a small minority of parents found the HSCL teacher a useful source of support and advice (Table 1.15 p.111). Like the middle class parents, they were more likely to rely on the class teacher. As Archer and Shortt (2003 p.108) perceived, the scheme does not appear to address the educational capital of parents and equip them with the knowledge needed to make informed decisions about their children's future education. Middle class parents were not only far more aware of the educational changes over the last six years, but they were also more aware, through their social networks, of how the system works. They not only had the economic resources (Schultz 1973) to provide a wide variety of extra curricular activities for their children, but they also had the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) to consider and plan for their children's future educational needs.

8.4.2 Partnership at National Level

All the interviewees were aware of the role of the State and the DES in regulating and funding schools. They were perceived as being solely responsible for the education system and parents depended on them to ensure that their children received a quality education that was up to international standards (Department of Education 1995 p.193). They favoured welfare rather than private provision and felt that the State was not doing enough to support families. While interviewees felt that the State was not meeting its responsibilities towards their children, particularly in the area of special needs and class size, they also felt powerless to address these issues. Complaining was pointless as they would not be listened to. The State's emphasis on the human capital model meant that parents perceived the needs of parents and children as being subservient to serving the needs of business and high-tech industry (Walshe 1999 p.6).

Interviewees had no concept of the partnership process at national level and felt that parents had very little say in the curriculum and other DES policies. While the NPCP represents parents at national level, those who were interviewed were unaware, not only of its role, but also of its existence. There was no recognition that the NPCP was an influential national organisation, which would make representations on their behalf or advise them on educational matters. Parents rang the DES if they had a problem rather

than the NPCP. It remains to be seen if the revised structures as envisaged in the NPCP's strategic plan will make a difference to parental involvement at national level (NPCP 2007a).

As with the NPCP, there was no awareness of the role of the Church in school management and governance. This highlights the change in the Church's status in today's society. From an era of total control and domination, the school was no longer linked with the Church in the minds of the interviewees. No one saw the rights of parents and the Church to be complementary (O'Sullivan 1992 p.465) and some questioned the Church's right to be involved in education, particularly in the light of recent scandals.

Active partnership requires information (Table 1.3 p.49). The last decade has been a time of immense change in Irish Education. New legislation and a revised curriculum have been introduced. Chapter Five, which examined the participants' knowledge of these changes, highlighted the information deficit at national level. While the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and the schools keep parents informed of their responsibilities under the *Education Welfare Act 2000*, there is no similar body to inform parents of their rights, particularly in relation to the *Education Act 1998*. The NCCA has begun to address the deficit in relation to the curriculum with the introduction of the DVD and a dedicated area of their website addressed to parents.

While the use of the schools as channels of communication with parents may be cost-effective, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it may not be the most effective means of communication. Not only does the NEWB send its brochures directly to parents using the children's allowance database, but, being aware that its clientele is constantly changing, it sends them at regular intervals. This ensures that the information reaches parents directly.

8.4.3 Summary

Finally, partnership requires active engagement by all of the partners. Parents in this research were very much focused on the local immediate issues that related specifically to their own children. They were prepared to trust their children's teachers and had little interest in long-term national concerns. As suggested by the INTO (1997 p.9) and the CPSMA (2004 p.17), parents were quite happy to leave professional and financial matters to others. The culture of clientelism and history of passivity prevented them from questioning the *status quo* at both national and local level. While parents were very happy to support the school in educating their children, they prioritised their own

individual private planning for their children's education over getting involved in the school's SDP processes.

8.5 Conclusion

This section evaluated the research findings in relation to the implementation of the national policy of home-school partnership in five primary schools in North Dublin. As this is only a small sample of the total parent and school population, these results may not be generalisable to other schools.

The model of partnership adopted implicitly reflects the power and practices of the dominant group (Graue *et al.* p. 2001 p.471), which in this case is the State and the DES. Partnership is described in official documents (Jupp 2006 p.276) as a set of relationships based on the pursuit of common goals, trust and a problem-solving approach, where the government retains the ultimate responsibility for decision-making (Department of the Taoiseach 2006 p.74). The main emphasis is on involving parents in policy development and the provision of education services (DES 2005c p.15; DES 2006a p.26).

8.5.1 Research Question 1: How were case study participants involved in their children's education both at home and at school?

As seen in Chapters Four and Six, they were heavily involved in their children's education at home. They read to their children, took them on outings and did all the educational work that is expected of 'good' parents. Involvement in their children's schools, which was outlined in Chapters Five and Seven, was a different matter. While the majority supported their children's school work (Figures 1.17; 1.18 pp.137-8) and attended school events (Figure 1.32 p.172), only a minority volunteered or got involved in school governance (Figure 1.33 p.172). Participants appeared to prefer helping out informally rather than joining the Parents Association or the BOM. Most parents felt that they were well informed about their children's progress either by the teacher or by monitoring their children's learning (Figure 1.30 p.168). However, they had little information about the curriculum and were not involved in policy formation in any systematic way.

Service delivery rather than policy development was the prime focus of parental involvement. While parents acted as educators at home, they operated as supporters,

consumers and welfare recipients in the school. Most adopted whichever role suited their children's immediate interests.

8.5.2 Research Question 2: What kind of relationship did participants have with the school?

As seen in Chapters Five and Seven, most parents had a very good relationship with the school (Figure 1.24 p.155). They felt that they were welcome in the school, that they could talk to the teachers and make a complaint when necessary. However, there were some impenetrable factors (Cullingford 1996a p.5) which prevented parents from feeling comfortable about raising issues with the teachers with only a minority feeling that they had a say in school policies and events (Figure 1.34 p.173). Frequent home-school communication (Tables 1.35; 1.36 pp.159-60) and adherence to the values of the school enhanced the relationship between parents and the school (Tables 1.37; 1.38 pp.160-1).

8.5.3 Research Question 3: What type of home-school communication system existed?

Parent-teacher meetings, notes, end-of-year reports along with children's anecdotes were the main means of communication between home and school. This tended to be one-way (Figure 1.28 p.165) and centred on organisational rather than curriculum issues (Figure 1.27 p.164). With both sides only making contact when an issue arose, it also tended to be problem-orientated. Written communication was the norm, though in the disadvantaged schools and the junior classes, parents met the class teacher more frequently.

With most parents monitoring their children's learning by helping with homework and checking copies and workbooks, they felt that they knew both the standard of learning in the school and their children's progress (Figure 1.31 p.168). However, this did not keep them up-to-date on curriculum and national policy changes.

8.5.4 Research Question 4: What was the difference in how parents from middle class and disadvantaged schools got involved in their children's education?

While disadvantaged parents had more frequent contact with the teachers and helped out more in the school (Table 1.46 p.180), the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997 p.47) of the middle class parents (Figure 1.5 p.114; Table 1.17 p.115) appeared to

outweigh any of the advantages that the HSCL scheme conferred on disadvantaged parents. Being more future orientated, middle class parents actively shaped their children's educational career from an early age. Disadvantaged parents appeared to hold more traditional views on child rearing and the appropriate parenting roles. The dangers of the 'street' and their lack of educational capital resulted in a more resigned attitude towards their children's educational outcomes. The most 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002) parents were those with lower levels of education (Tables 1.18 p.116; 1.47 p.181).

8.5.5 Research Question 5: What influence had other variables such as family status, religion, gender and age on parental involvement both at home and at school?

While the majority of participants supported the Catholic values of the school, practising Catholics were more likely to get involved with the school (Table 1.48 p.181) and have a say in school policies and events (Table 1.42 p.175).

While the fathers who participated in this research felt just as responsible for their children's education as mothers, traditional gender practices and attitudes remained (Figure 1.2 p.101). Mothers appeared to be more active and 'hands-on' in their involvement in their children's education, especially at school. 'Maternal gatekeeping' (Allen and Hawkins 1999), child protection issues along with education and employment levels were cited as the reasons why fathers were not involved more.

One-child families and those with younger children were more actively involved in the home curriculum. Those with larger families supported the school more (Table 1.50 p.182). Older parents had more educational capital (Table 1.33 p.154). In addition, like those in two-parent families, they had a better social network and were more likely to get involved in the school (Tables 1.49; 1.51 pp.182-3).

8.5.6 Research Question 6: How was the national policy of partnership being implemented in these schools?

In Chapter One partnership was defined as the relationship between parents, the school, the State and the Catholic Church in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school. This definition, like much of the national policy on parental involvement, is expressed in broad symbolic terms.

Parents in this research appeared to keep their side of the bargain in that they nurtured a learning environment, co-operated with and supported the school and other

educational partners, and fulfilled their special role in the development of their child as best they could (Department of Education 1995 p.9). They also ensured that their children complied with the school rules (Ireland 2000).

Participants felt that their children's schooling was a partnership between home and school (Figure 1.1 p.98). Home-school relationships were very positive with most parents feeling that the schools were doing a very good job under difficult circumstances. The majority felt that they were informed of school activities and their children's progress (Figures 1.29; 1.30 pp.167-8). However, while class teachers were an important source of support and advice (Table 1.15 p.111), parents still felt it necessary to monitor their children's school work to ensure that the teachers were doing their job and that their children were learning (Figure 1.16 p.136).

Home-school partnership in planning for children's learning was not evident in this research. Most parents were involved in the schools as spectators (Figure 1.32 p.172) rather than volunteers (Figure 1.33 p.172) and decision-makers. While they could raise issues with the principals and teachers as individuals, the majority did not feel that parents had a say in whole-school decisions and policies (Figure 1.34 p.173). The power structures within the schools prevented the full implementation of this aspect of the policy (Foucault 2000 p.18). Home-school collaboration focused mainly on the peripheral and uncontested areas of school life (Blenkin *et al.* 1992 p.52). 'Involved' parents tended to conform to the religious (Tables 1.42 p.175; 1.48 p.181) and educational (Table 1.47 p. p.181) values of the school. As the schools' SDP structures could not accommodate the systematic and continuous involvement of parents in planning process, parents were usually informed about decision after they had been made (DES 2006b). Lacking the educational capital to challenge these decisions, most parents deferred to the teachers' professional expertise and judgement (Munn 1998 p.386; DES 2006b p.51).

While the power differential between home and school was influential, the interest of parents in their own individual child (Wolfendale 1996 p.35; OECD 1991 p.60; Moos and Dempster 1998 p.106) also prevented the successful implementation of the policy. The majority of participants prioritised the home-curriculum and supporting their own children's learning over helping out in the school. This was particularly evident in one-child families (Table 1.50 p.182). Consequently, the increase in secular consumerism and the number of one-child families (CSO 2007a p.20) may have major implications for the national policy of parental involvement.

In the future, schools may not be able to rely on the financial contributions and unpaid labour of parents to supplement the resources provided by State. If, like the parents of only children in this research, parents focus solely on their private objectives for their own individual child, they will not be interested in supporting the 'public goals' of education (Levin 2004 p.172) and getting involved with their children's schools. In an increasingly consumerist society, the school may be viewed as a service provider, which is accountable to parents to provide international standards of performance and delivery (DES 1998b p.8). This may lead to impersonal, adversarial and fragile relationships between home and school.

The changes in the Church-State relationship were evident in this research. With the increasing diversity of the school population, monopoly Catholicism (Fulton 2000a p.13) no longer appeared to exist. While participants valued the Catholic ethos of the schools, the Church was not perceived as a partner in their children's education. Most of those interviewed questioned the role of the Church in school governance and ownership. This finding is particularly relevant in the light of the current debate on school patronage (Flynn 2007 p.8; Power 2007 p.20).

The State, on the other hand, had moved from a subsidiary role (Inglis 1998 p.57) to one of domination, as far as the interviewees were concerned. They were quite happy with this highly centralised model, once the DES was prepared to monitor teaching standards and fund their children's education. It was interesting that while the DES perceived parents as consumers (DES 1998a), parents perceived the State's provision for their children's education as part of their entitlements as citizens of a welfare state. Some interviewees considered the State neglectful in that they felt that it did not take its responsibilities seriously and provide the necessary resources to ensure that the education system was of the highest quality as measured by international standards (Department of Education 1995 p.193).

Interviewees were unaware of the partnership process at national level and felt that parents had little say over national policy. While networking with other parents at local level was an important source of support and advice for parents, they were unable to identify the contribution of the NPCP to the partnership process.

8.5.7 Summary

Policy evaluation, according to Dye (1995 p.320) is about learning about the consequences of public policy. The key objectives of this policy were to ensure that

parents were involved in their children's learning as well as school decision-making and governance (Table 1.3 p.49). In this research, which is only based on a small sample of the total parent population, there were major gaps between the rhetoric of national policy and the reality in schools (Cussen 1995 p.51).

According to NCPP (2003 p.69), the single most important contribution partnership makes to an organisation is to create the conditions which enable an ongoing discussion and debate around complex issues. This was not evident in this research (Figure 1.34 p.173). Firstly, as outlined in Chapter Five, parents did not have enough knowledge about the recent developments in curriculum and national educational policy to engage in discussions on equal terms with the teachers. Secondly, there were no school-based structures to accommodate the systematic and continuous involvement of all parents in the planning process (DES 2006b p.80). In addition, the Irish tendencies for Church paternalism, political clientelism and modern consumerism, which encouraged individual rather than collective (O'Sullivan 1992 p.464) approaches to problem-solving, did not help. Not wanting to antagonise people (FN 13-03-06), interviewees preferred to maintain their good relationships with the school rather than threaten the teachers' professional status by insisting on their legislative rights. Others, particularly those who did not share the school's religious (Table 1.48 p.181) and educational values (Table 1.47 p.181), preferred to focus on the education of their own children rather than getting involved in the school.

The other dimension of home-school partnership is the relationship between parents and teachers in supporting children's education. The parents in this research had a very positive relationship with their children's teachers (Figure 1.24 p.155) and felt that they could turn to them for support and advice on rearing their children (Table 1.15 p.111). In turn, they supported the teachers by providing an extensive home curriculum, ensuring their children were prepared for school and by attending school events. If information sharing, communication and openness about individual children's learning are at the heart of how partnership works (NCPP 2003 p.70) then this aspect of the national policy of home-school partnership appeared to be very effective (Figure 1.30 p.168). However, parents' lack of educational capital, particularly in relation to the on-going changes in national policy, made it difficult for them to plan their children's education.

While the national policy of home-school partnership may have been only partially successful, its symbolic (Dye 1995 p.323) or 'feel-good' (Ó Cinnéide 2003

p.330) function of giving legitimacy to parental involvement in their children's schooling was important. As a result, parents felt that schools had become more open and approachable over the last six years (Table 1.30 p.148). With parents prioritising their private interests over the public goals of education (Levin 2004 p.174), this tended to be on an individualistic clientelistic basis. It appears from this research that Ireland has some way to go before it has one of the 'most parent-participative systems in the world' (OECD 1997 p.141).

8.6 Limitations and Exclusions

The limitations and exclusions of this study are outlined in more detail in Chapters Three and Six. The research was confined to five Roman Catholic primary schools in North Dublin. Not all parents from these schools contributed to the research. One school, the middle class school my daughters attended, was used for participant observation only. These parents were excluded from the interviews and questionnaires. In addition, not all parents from the other four schools returned their questionnaires (Table 1.5 p. 80) and only a tiny minority agreed to be interviewed. While all questionnaire respondents and the middle class interviewees were self-selected, only one disadvantaged interviewee was. The other three disadvantaged interviewees and the members of the two focus groups were asked to participate by the HSCL teacher and the principal respectively.

The majority of questionnaires were returned by mothers. Some fathers, particularly those not residing in the family home, may not have been given the opportunity to participate. Special schools, schools with non-Catholic patronage along with those with large number of international students were also excluded. As these schools were large single sex schools in an urban area, the findings may be different in smaller mixed schools in suburban and rural areas. Parents who home schooled their children were also excluded.

The use of participant observation meant that my values are embedded in the research process and theories (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994 p. 122; Silverman 2004 p. 64) to a far greater extent than with other research methodologies. While the following two factors may have given me greater access and insight into these schools than would be the case with other researchers, they may also have created an implicit bias in the findings (Greenberg and Walberg 1998 p. 171). All five schools are within the

secondary school catchment area in which I live. As a SDP facilitator I have facilitated and supported these schools in their planning processes.

The focus of this research was on the experiences and perceptions of individual parents in these schools rather than the activities of Parents Associations, both locally and nationally. The views of children, teachers, Principals, Boards of Management, which may differ to those of the parents, were excluded. The lack of base-line data, the diffuse nature of the policy and the lack of a specific implementation plan makes it difficult to assess if the research findings are a result of national policy (Rossi *et al.* 1999 p. 239).

As with other case studies, this case study is unlikely to be generalisable to other schools and parents with these limitations and exclusions increasing this probability. However, realising this, I tried to be as reflexive as possible at each stage of the study (Coffey 1999 p. 126; Darlington and Scott 2002 p. 18). For example, at the design stage, I was very aware of gender and social class bias, while I also tried to ensure that my 'insider' knowledge of the school personnel did not influence my analysis of the data.

8.7 Statement of Ethics

This statement of ethics underlines the values and principles under which this research was conducted. Throughout the research, I have been honest in respect of my own actions as well as the values and theories that informed this work. Possible conflicts of interest, in particular that of my role as the SDP facilitator for the schools involved, have been highlighted. Good practice in relation to the chosen research methodologies was followed at all times. Clear and accurate records were kept of the research procedures followed as well as the interim and final results.

Permission was sought from all concerned with the questionnaires, documentary evidence, focus groups and interviews. While permission was sought from most of those involved with the participant observation, it was not feasible to obtain consent from everyone. However, the intrusion was minimal and no risks are anticipated. The anonymity of the schools and all participants was respected. Participation was voluntary and participants were treated with dignity and respect.

Careful consideration was given to minimizing any negative social or personal consequences that might occur as a result of this research. This meant making clear to participants the uses to which the information would be put and to whom it would be communicated. The confidentiality of the respondents was respected at all times. I was

sensitive to the wishes of the schools and individuals involved as to the extent they wished to get involved with the research and responsive to any indications, either verbal or non-verbal, that they wished to withdraw and/or get further involved in the research.

The impact of the research on the identity of the participants was addressed by ensuring that research instruments were designed to be as user-friendly and non-threatening as possible. Questions that would yield low variance were included in order to lessen parental anxieties and guilt feelings about the activities which they were not involved with.

8.8 Recommendations

The recommendations, as outlined here, are those of the researcher and are based on the findings of this case study of five schools in North Dublin. If future research finds that these results apply to the total population of schools and parents, then the following recommendations need to be implemented at local and national level for the national policy of parental involvement in their children's education to be effective.

8.8.1 Parental involvement in School Planning

- School-based structures, which can 'accommodate the systematic and continuous involvement of parents in the planning process' (DES 2006b p.80), are needed. At present, only a minority, whose values correspond with those of the school, are involved in the planning process and this tends to be on an irregular and once-off basis.
- Additional resources at both national and local level are needed if all parents are to be involved in the SDP process (Table 1.3 p.49). This will include additional personnel and funding at local level to enable schools to establish planning structures that will allow all parents to engage in on-going review and action planning on curriculum and organisational issues. The SDPS service will need to be expanded so that facilitators can support these structures and processes.
- The WSE process needs to be reviewed to give all parents the opportunity to contribute. At present, only the parents' representatives on the BOM and the officers of Parents Associations, which are affiliated to the NPCP, are invited to meet with the inspectorate at the pre-evaluation stage. Only the teachers and the BOM (DES 2006a p.12) attend the post-evaluation meeting. This not only limits

the parents' contribution to the WSE and SDP process but also their educational capital. As seen from this research it also excludes those who values differ from that of the school (Tables 1.47; 1.48 p.181).

8.8.2 Improving Parents' Educational Capital

- The DES needs to address how parents can be kept informed of the various changes at national level which will impact on their children's education. While the NCCA and the NEWB keep parents informed about the curriculum and their responsibilities under the *Education Welfare Act 2000*, there is no similar body to inform parents of their rights, particularly in relation to the *Education Act 1998*.
- The HSCL scheme needs to address the educational capital of disadvantaged and 'marginalised' (Conaty 2002) parents and equip them with the knowledge needed to make informed decisions about their children's future education. A programme is needed to help parents plan for the future educational needs of their children.
- The Parent Section of the DES's website needs to be updated to make it more informative and user-friendly for parents. It also needs a link to the WSE reports, which is easily accessible for parents.
- Not only does the NPCP need to involve parents more in the partnership process at national level, they also need to be proactive in highlighting for parents the changes in national education policy and their implications for children's education and schooling.

8.8.3 Professional Supports

- Specific training for the BOMs, principals and Parents Associations is needed in how they can involve all parents in the schools' activities and SDP processes. Particular attention should be given to the impact of the ethos of the school on the participation of parents in school activities.
- Both teacher education and continuous professional development needs to include modules on involving parents in their children's education. The headings, educator, supporter, consumer and welfare recipient, as used in this research, would be very useful in examining the home-school relationship and the power differential that exists between teachers and parents. The connection between the home-school communication system and parental perceptions that they are both

welcome in the school and have a say in school policies and events needs to be highlighted.

- Circular 24/91 *Parents as Partners in Education* (Department of Education 1991) needs to be updated to include a clear definition of partnership along with the rights and responsibilities of the stakeholders as outlined in the legislation and official documentation.

8.8.4 Recommendations for Future Research

- The findings of this research were based on a case study of five schools in North Dublin. Further research is needed to see if these results are generalisable to all schools in the country. This would include mixed schools with teaching principals.
- Evaluations at national level, when appropriate, should include the views of parents. They should also focus on the impact of the services on the intended recipients (Hantrais 2004 p.198) in relation to their key objectives rather than on service delivery.
- Further research is needed to see if the views of the 'more marginalised' (Conaty 2002), 'unreachable' (Eivers *et al.* 2004 p.174) or 'uninvolved' (Ryan 1994) parents are different to those of the more active and visible majority.
- Action research is needed to explore various ways that parents can be informed of national policy and given an opportunity to contribute to its development at both national and local level.
- This research focused on Roman Catholic schools. Similar research is needed on schools with other patronages, e.g., Church of Ireland, Educate Together, etc., to assess the impact of the schools' ethos on home-school partnership.
- Additional research is needed to explore the home curriculum in further detail and to assess its impact on children's learning. Particular emphasis needs to be paid to the impact of gender on parenting roles and practice.
- This research focused on the involvement of parents in their children's education at local level. Additional research is necessary on the involvement of parents in the education system at national level.
- A 360° evaluation of the national policy of home-school, which includes the views of children, teachers, principals, BOM and other stakeholders, is needed.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Correspondence

1.1 Letter to Board of Management in Four of the Case Study Schools

24.10.05

Dear Chairperson,

As you are aware, national policy, as outlined in the Education Act 1998, Education Welfare Act 2000 and the revised Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999), promotes partnership between home and school.

As part of my PhD Degree with Trinity College, Dublin, I am examining the impact of this national policy of partnership on parents and their involvement in their children's education.

In this study, I hope to investigate, from the perspective of parents, how this aspect of national policy is implemented at local level. My research methods will include observation, focus groups, questionnaires and interviews. The role and involvement of parents in their children's education and schools and their views on the home-school-state-parish relationship will be examined. The structures and supports at state, school, parish and community level, which promote partnership and support parents in their role, as educators, will also be identified.

I am asking to include the parents in your school as part of the sample of parents in this research. All data will be held in the strictest confidence and individual schools will not be identified in the research document. I will be pleased to send you a summary of the results, which could be used by yourself and others to inform future debate and policy decisions.

For my research I plan to

- Distribute a questionnaire to a sample of parents.
- Interview parent representatives on the Board of Management and the Parents' Association as well as a number of other parents.
- Observe some of the meetings held during the school year, which involve parents
- Analyse a copy of your school's parent information booklet as well as notes sent home to parents during the year

I would appreciate if you could let me know by **5th December 2005** if your school would like to become involved with this research. If you require any further details please contact me at the above address and phone numbers and I will be happy to supply the relevant information.

Thank you,
Yours sincerely,

_____

Josephine Bleach

1.2 Letter to Board of Management in the Local Girls' School

16.06.05

Dear Chairperson,

As you are aware, national policy, as outlined in the Education Act 1998, Education Welfare Act 2000 and the revised Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999), promotes partnership between home and school.

As part of my PhD Degree with Trinity College, Dublin, I am examining the impact of this national policy of partnership on parents and their involvement in their children's education.

In this study, I hope to investigate, from the perspective of parents, how this aspect of national policy is implemented at local level. My research methods will include observation, focus groups, questionnaires and interviews. The role and involvement of parents in their children's education and schools and their views on the home-school-state-parish relationship will be examined. The structures and supports at state, school, parish and community level, which promote partnership and support parents in their role, as educators, will also be identified.

Participant observation, using my own experience of being a parent of primary school children, will form part of this research. It will be used to validate and reinforce the findings from the other schools in the research. Other parents from your school may also be asked to pilot some of the research methods listed above. All data will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from myself will have access to it. Moreover, individual views, apart from my own, will not be identified in the research document. I will be pleased to send you a summary of the results, which could be used by yourself and others to inform future debate and policy decisions.

I hope this meets with the Board's approval. I can be contacted at the above address and phone numbers and will be happy to provide any further clarification or details you require.

Thank you,
Yours sincerely,

_____

Josephine Bleach

1.3 Letter to the Principals in Four of the Case Study Schools

21.02.06

Dear Principal,

Thank you for agreeing to your school being part of this research. I enclose the following for distribution.

Class:	**Contents:**
Senior Infants	Questionnaires
First Class	Letter requesting volunteers for interviews
Second Class	Questionnaires
Fourth Class	Questionnaires
Fifth Class	Letter requesting volunteers for interviews
Sixth Class	Questionnaires

I enclose a copy of all of the items for your information.

I will collect the returned items on **Friday 10th March**.

All replies will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from myself will have access to them. Moreover, individual views or schools will not be identified in the research document.

If you require any further details please contact me at the above address and phone numbers and I will be happy to supply the relevant information.

Thank you,
Yours sincerely,

_____

Josephine Bleach

Appendix 2 Participant Observation

2.1 Sample of Participant Observation

Field Notes - August 05

CDL (Child directed learning); SSL (Sibling supported learning); SDL (School Directed Learning); PDL (Parent Directed Learning); CC (Cultural Capital); HC (Home Curriculum)

Date	Observation	Personnel	Comment
23rd Sep	D2 – note to check hairs for nits	Mother	Supporter & welfare
24th Sep	D2 went to the shops –bought a rope, butter, eggs and drinking chocolate		CDL: SPHE, Maths & language
24th Sep	Bought new school bag and dancing shoes: €25	Mother	Consumer & supporter
25th Sep	D1&2 – Making family trees	Mother & father, grandmother	CDL & SSL: HC: History
26th Sep	Introduced a new rule about TV – it was not to be switched on until 7pm	Mother	PDL
26th Sep	D1&2 – homework – trying to help both of them and get the dinner – frustrating D2 – need to use English dictionary – a ___ of monkeys – hope we have it right D1 – need to translate and spell Irish	Mother	CC Consumer & supporter
27th Sep	D1&2 - homework	Mother	Supporter (Child & school)
27th Sep	Decision not to continue French lessons for this year	Children	CDL
28th Sep	Catalogues for Australia & Round the World – decide on where we will go and stay	Family	HC: Geography, SPHE, CC, PDL
28th Sep	Parent Association's AGM – wasn't going to go but D2 insisted that I go. Big crowd attended – 75% women & 25% men Listened to activities from last year – fundraising and supporting the school Presented cheques to Principals Outlined some policies from the Senior School Funds decreasing, established members leaving Plea for new blood – for the good of your child – they love to have their parent involved – social side – make friends – not boring committee work – involved in small projects No questions from the floor John Lonergan to talk about parenting	Mother	Supporter
29th Sep	Shops to buy birthday presents and clothes for D1and D2	Mother	HC – Maths, SPHE, English
29th Sep	Help D2 with knitting	Mother	CDL – Visual Arts
29th Sep	Help D2 get 'Wild West'costume ready for party	Mother and D2	HC – SPHE, Visual Arts
30th Sep	D1 – birthday party in Shopping Centre	Father	SPHE - networking
30th Sep	Bought gun for 'Wild West' Costume. Asked mother to make holster	Father	
1st Oct	D1&2 Swimming	Father	PDL - PE
1st Oct	D1&2 Drama	Father	HC – PDL & CDL - Drama
1st Oct	Mother made holster out of cereal box, D2 painted it	Mother	HC – Visual Arts
1st Oct	Family meal – take away – pretending to be in a posh restaurant		HC - SPHE

2.2 Letter to Parents regarding the Parents' Diary

23.01.06

Dear Parent / Guardian,

National policy, as outlined in the Education Act 1998, Education Welfare Act 2000 and the Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999), promotes partnership between home and school.

As part of my PhD Degree with Trinity College, Dublin, I am examining the impact of this national policy of partnership on parents and their involvement in their children's education.

In this study, I hope to investigate, from the perspective of parents with primary school children, how this aspect of national policy is implemented at local level. Your views as a parent will be central to this study.

I am asking you to fill out the enclosed diary, so that your experience of parental involvement in your children's education and primary schools will be included in these findings. It should only take you about 5-10 minutes to complete each evening.

All replies will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from me will have access to them. Moreover, individual views or schools will not be identified in the research document.

I will appreciate it if you will complete the enclosed diary by the **31st January 2006** and return it to the school in the enclosed envelope.

If you require any further details please contact me at the above address and phone numbers and I will be happy to supply the relevant information.

Thank you,
Yours sincerely,

_____

Josephine Bleach

Parents' Diary of their involvement in their Children's Education and Schools

Thank you for filling in this diary.

Your views are an important part of this research.
All replies will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from me will have access to them. Moreover, individual views will not be identified in the research document.

If you wish to discuss the diary with me, I may be contacted at
086 8153600.
Josephine Bleach

To fill in this diary, just write down any educational or school related activities that happen during the week in the spaces provided in the blank diary. An example of a parent's dairy is included to show you how it could be filled in. When you have finished the diary, please put it in to the enclosed envelope, seal it and give it to your child to return to the school by
Wednesday 31st January 2006

Sample Parents' Diary
This diary shows how one could be filled in

Day:	Contact or involvement with school	Educational activities at home
Monday	I help Ann with her homework. I sign homework.	Mary goes to the shops on a message. I read Joe a story
Tuesday	Ann brings her Art home from school. I help Ann with her homework. I sign homework. Note home to check for nits.	Joe asked me for page to draw a picture. He showed me the drawing afterwards
Wednesday	Note from school to say there is a staff meeting next Wednesday. I help Ann with her homework. I sign homework.	Ann walks the dog with her brother. I play scrabble with Mary.
Thursday	I help Ann with her homework. I sign homework. Mary out sick yesterday so I write a note explaining absence to the teacher.	Joe asked questions about the ramps on the road
Friday	Mary tells me about their school project. She has to choose an artist and do a project with Niamh on it. Ann asks for a black shawl for play. We don't have one.	We watched video "The Borrowers" together
Saturday	I wash the uniforms for school	Mary and Ann go to swimming lessons Ann goes to the zoo with her friend and friend's mother
Sunday	I make school lunches	We went to see Star Wars

Josephine Bleach (086 8153600)

Parents' Diary

Day:	Contact or involvement with school	Educational activities at home
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Josephine Bleach (086 8153600)

Appendix 3: Questionnaires

3.1 Letter to Parents Regarding Questionnaire

21.03.06

Dear Parents / Guardians,

National policy, as outlined in the Education Act 1998, Education Welfare Act 2000 and the Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999), promotes partnership between home and school.

As part of my PhD Degree with Trinity College, Dublin, I am examining the impact of this national policy of partnership on parents and their involvement in their children's education.

In this study, I hope to investigate, from the perspective of parents with primary school children, how this aspect of national policy is implemented at local level. Your views as a parent will be central to this study.

I am asking you to fill out the enclosed questionnaire, so that your experience of parental involvement in primary schools will be included in these findings. It should only take you about 10-15 minutes to complete.

All replies will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from myself will have access to them. Moreover, individual views or schools will not be identified in the research document.

I would appreciate it if you will complete the enclosed questionnaire by **Wednesday 5th April 2006.** Please place it in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope and either post it directly to me or return it to the school.

If you require any further details please contact me at the above address and phone numbers and I will be happy to supply the relevant information.

Thank you,
Yours sincerely,

_____

Josephine Bleach

3.2 Pre-test Questionnaire

Questionnaire on Parental Involvement in their Children's Education and Schools

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire.
Your views are an important part of this research.
All replies will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from me will have access to them. Moreover, individual views will not be identified in the research document.

If you wish to discuss the questionnaire with me I may be contacted at 086 8153600.
Josephine Bleach

Please put the questionnaires in to the envelope and return it to your child's class teacher by Friday 24rd November 2005

1. Are you the

✓ *Tick the correct box*

- [ ] **Mother**
- [ ] **Father**
- [ ] **Guardian (Female)**
- [ ] **Guardian (Male)**

2. Are you a

✓ *Tick the box*

- [ ] **Lone parent**
- [ ] **Married /Living with a partner**
- [ ] **Divorced / separated**
- [ ] **Widow / widower**

3. At present, how many of your children are

- *Write the number in each box*

- [ ] **Too young for pre-school**
- [ ] **At pre school**
- [ ] **Going to this primary school**
- [ ] **Going to another primary school**
- [ ] **Going to secondary school**
- [ ] **Under 16 and not attending school**
- [ ] **Going to Third Level**
- [ ] **Working**
- [ ] **Unemployed**

4. What age are you

✓ *Tick the correct box*

- [ ] **Under 20 years**
- [ ] **21 – 30years**
- [ ] **30 – 40 years**
- [ ] **41–50 years**
- [ ] **51 + years**

5. How do you help your child and his/her school?

✓ *Tick either the yes or no box*

Yes	No	
		I tell my child that school is important
		I read my child stories
		I play games with my child
		I look at my child's copies and workbooks
		I listen and talk to my child about school
		I read all the notes that my child brings home from school
		I make sure that my child keeps the school rules
		I help fundraise for the school
		I know how well my child is doing at school
		I go to school plays, concerts, games and other events
		I talk about the school with other parents
		I go to classes and talks for parents
		I help out in my child's school
		I help out in my child's class
		I am a member of the Parents' Association in my child's school
		I know my child's teacher and the school principal
		I know the standard of learning and teaching in my child's school
		I am a member of the Board of Management in my child's school
		I am a member of a group outside the school

List the group(s) you are involved with outside the school

6. Who does the following for your children?

✓ *Tick the boxes*

	Mother does it	Father does it	Both parents do it	Some body others than parents does it	Nobody does it
Helps with Homework					
Pays for school items e.g. books, uniforms					
Writes notes to the school and teachers					
Reads the school notes					
Reads the child's school reports					
Makes sure rules on bedtime, chores, going out with friends etc. are kept					
Talks to the teacher about how the child is getting on in school					
Sends the children to school clean and tidy					
Makes the school lunches					
Attends Parent-teacher and other school meetings					
Brings the children to after-school activities e.g. swimming, dancing, football					
Brings the child to the library					
Brings the child on outings e.g. cinema, park					

7. Do you agree or disagree with the following?

✓ *Tick the box: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree or strongly disagree*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Parents should support the school					
Parents are responsible for their children's behaviour					
Parents and teachers should work together for the good of the child					
Education should be left to the teachers who are the experts					
Parents should play an active part in the life of the school					
Parents are the primary educators of their children					
Women are primarily responsible for child care					
Parents should put their children's needs and interests before their own					
Schools do not need to keep parents up-to-date on curriculum changes					
Parents should make their children respect and obey their teachers					
Fathers are not responsible for their children					
The Catholic values of the school is very important					
Good relationships between home and school make no difference to children's learning					
Parents need to choose a school that meets the needs of their own child					
Parents need help from the school to support their child's education					
Schools should respect parents' wishes					

8. Who, do you think, is responsible for the following

✓ *Tick the boxes*

	Parents	Teachers	Both parents and teachers	Neither parents or teachers
Children do their homework				
Children wear the correct uniform				
Children have their school books, pencils and copies				
Children have religious and moral values				
Children go to school				
Children behave in school				
Children can mix well with others				
Children are good citizens				
Children can read and write				
Children can do maths				

9. Where do you get support and advice on bringing up and educating your child?

✓ *Tick the boxes*

	Partner		Friends		Own parents
	Family		Child's Teachers		Internet
	Newspapers or magazines		Home School teacher		Books
	Other parents		Television		School Principal
	Your children		Parenting Courses		Neighbours

Other? _____

10. Rules for Schools

✓ *Tick the true, false or don't know box*

True	False	Don't know	
			Schools do not have to tell parents how their children are getting on
			Parents can be taken to court if their child does not attend school
			Schools do not have to consult parents on their policies
			The Board of Management must keep parents informed on school matters
			Parents have no right to see their children's school records
			Every parent should get a copy of the code of behaviour from their child's school
			If children are not in school for 20 days in a full school year the school must report them to the Education Welfare Officer
			There are no parents on a school's Board of Management
			Parents can take a Section 29 appeal under the Education Act 1998 if a school refuses to enrol their child
			Parents are not allowed see the school's financial accounts
			A Revised Curriculum has been introduced in Irish Primary schools

11. Do you agree or disagree with the following?

✓ *Tick the box: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree or strongly disagree*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel welcome in my child's school					
The teachers will listen to me					
I have a say in school policies					
I have a say in what is being taught					
My child is learning in this school					

12. What changes have you noticed in schools over the last six years?

13. What activities does your child do outside school hours?

✓ *Tick the box*

	Art		**Drama**		**Scouts or Guides**
	Music		**Sport**		

Other? _____

14. Please include any comments you would like to make on parental involvement with their children's education and schools.

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire.
Your help and co-operation is very much appreciated.

Your comments on and criticisms of the questionnaire are most welcomed
Is it too long? Too difficult to read?

Questions are too difficult? Hard to understand?

Does it look attractive and easy to complete?

Questionnaire on Parental Involvement in their Children's Education and Schools

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire.
Your views are an important part of this research.
All replies will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from me will have access to them. Moreover, individual views will not be identified in the research document.

If you wish to discuss the questionnaire with me, I may be contacted at
086 8153600.
Josephine Bleach

Please put the questionnaires in to the envelope and give it to your child to **return to the school by**
Wednesday 1st June 2005

1. Are you a

✓ *Tick the correct box*

☐ Mother

☐ Father

☐ Guardian (Female)

☐ Guardian (Male)

☐ Other Please specify: _____

2. Are you a

✓ *Tick the correct box*

☐ One-parent family

☐ Two-parent family

☐ Other Please specify: _____

3. (a) How many children have you? ☐

(b) At present, how many of your children are

- *Write the number in each box*

☐ Too young for pre-school

☐ At pre school

☐ Going to primary school

☐ Going to secondary school

☐ Under 16 and not attending school

☐ Going to Third Level

☐ Working

☐ Unemployed

4. What age are you

✓ *Tick the correct box*

☐ Under 20 years

☐ 20 – 29years

☐ 30 – 39 years

☐ 40–49 years

☐ 50 + years

5. Which of the following applies to you?

✓ *Tick either the yes or no box*

Yes	No	
		I know how my child is doing in this school
		I know the school principal
		I go to school events e.g. plays, concerts, games etc.
		I talk about the school with other parents
		I normally go to talks and classes organised for parents in this school
		I help out in this school
		I usually give money towards fundraising events in this school
		I have a copy of the school rules and/or Code of Behaviour
		I attend parent-teacher and other school meetings
		I help organise the fundraising and events in this school
		I am a member of the Parents' Association in this school
		I go to talks and classes organised for parents outside this school
		I know my child's teacher
		I help out in my child's class
		I know the standard of learning and teaching in this school
		I go to the activities (AGM, fundraisers, talks etc.) run by the Parents' Association
		I am a member of the Board of Management in this school
		I am a member of a group (sporting, community etc.) outside the school

1.1 List the group(s) you are involved with outside the school

6. What are your views on the following?

✓ *Tick the box: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree or strongly disagree*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel welcome in this school					
The teachers listen to me					
I have a say in school policies					
The school tells me what is happening					
I have a say in what is being taught					
I can make a compliant in this school					
I can talk to the teacher about my child					

7. How often do you?

✓ *Tick the box: everyday, every week, every month, once a year, never*

	Every Day	Every Week	Every Month	Once a Year	Never
Help your child with Homework					
Pay for school items e.g. books, pencils, copies					
Write notes to your child's school/teacher					
Reads the notes sent home by the school					
Read stories to your child					
Play games with your child					
Talk to your child's teacher					
Look at your child's copies and workbooks					
Make the school lunches					
Bring your child to after-school activities					
Bring your child to the library					
Bring your child on outings e.g. cinema, park					

8. What activities does your child do outside school hours?

✓ *Tick the correct boxes*

	Art		Drama		Scouts or Guides
	Music		Sport		Youth Club

Other? _____

9. What are your views on the following?

✓ *Tick the box: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree or strongly disagree*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Education should be left to the teachers who are the experts					
Mothers are primarily responsible for their children's education					
Schools should keep parents up-to-date on how their child is getting on					
Parents should put their children's needs and interests before their own					
Parents are the most important teachers of their children					
Schools need to keep parents up-to-date on curriculum changes					
Parents should make their children respect and obey their teachers					
Fathers are not responsible for their children's education					
Parents do not need a copy of the school rules and policies					
The Catholic values of the school are very important					
Parents need help from teachers to educate their children					

10. Who, do you think, is responsible for the following

✓ *Tick the box: parents, teachers, both parents and teachers or neither parents or teachers*

	Parents	Teachers	Both parents and teachers	Neither parents or teachers
Children do their homework				
Children can read and write				
Children wear the correct uniform				
Children have religious and moral values				
Children go to school				
Children behave in school				
Children can mix well with other children				
Children are good citizens				
Children have their books, pencils and copies				
Children can do maths				

11. Where do you get support and advice on bringing up and educating your child?

✓ *Tick the correct boxes*

	Partner		Friends		Own parents
	Family		Church		Internet
	Newspapers or magazines		Home School teacher		Public Health Nurse
	Doctor		Television		School Principal
	Gardai		Child's Teachers		Therapist
	Other parents		Social Worker		Books
	Your children		Parenting Courses		Neighbours

Other? _____

12. In Ireland

✓ *Tick the box: true, false or don't know*

True	False	Don't know	
			Parents can be taken to court if their child does not attend school
			The Board of Management must keep parents informed on school matters
			Parents have no right to see their children's school records
			Every parent should get a copy of the code of behaviour from their child's school
			Parents are not allowed see the school's financial accounts
			If children are not in school for 20 days in a full school year the school must report them to the Education Welfare Officer
			There are no parents on a school's Board of Management
			Parents can appeal to the Department of Education and Science if a school refuses to enrol their child
			Schools do not have to consult parents on their policies
			A revised curriculum has been introduced in Irish Primary schools

13. Write three changes you have noticed in schools over the last six years?

14. Are you in?

✓ *Tick the correct box*

	Full time paid employment		Part time paid employment		Not in paid employment

15. Are you ?

✓ *Tick the correct box*

	Catholic		Christian		Non-Christian

16. Are you ?

✓ *Tick the correct box*

	An Irish citizen		An EU citizen excluding Ireland		An Non-EU citizen

17. Did you go to ?

✓ *Tick either the yes or no box*

Yes	No	
		Primary School
		Secondary School
		Third Level
		Other: Please specify: _____

18. Please include any comments you would like to make on parental involvement with their children's education and schools.

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire.
Your help and co-operation is very much appreciated.

Questionnaire on Parental Involvement in their Children's Education and Schools

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire.
Your views are an important part of this research.
All replies will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from me will have access to them. Moreover, individual views will not be identified in the research document.

If you wish to discuss the questionnaire with me, I may be contacted at
086 8153600.
Josephine Bleach

To fill in this questionnaire, just put a **black mark in your chosen space** next to each question. For example:

3. How do you help your child and his/her school?

	Yes	No
I tell my child that school is important	(■)	( )
I help out in my child's class	( )	(■)

When you have finished all the questions, please put the questionnaire in to the enclosed envelope, seal it and give it to your child to **return to the school by Thursday 9th March 2006**

1. Are you a ?
Put a black mark in the space beside your answer

- Mother ☐
- Father ☐
- Guardian (Female) ☐
- Guardian (Male) ☐
- Other ☐

If other, please specify: _____

2. What age are you?
Put a black mark in the space beside your answer

- Under 20 years ☐
- 20-29 years ☐
- 30-39 years ☐
- 40-49 years ☐
- 50+ years ☐

3. Are you a ?
Put a black mark in the space beside your answer

- one-parent family ☐
- two-parent family ☐
- other ☐

If other, please specify: _____

4. Are you?
Put a black mark in the space beside your answer

- Catholic ☐
- Other Christian ☐
- Other Religion ☐
- No Religion ☐

5. Which of the following applies to you? *Put a black mark in either the yes or no space for all the questions*

	YES	NO
I know how my child is doing at school	☐	☐
I have met the school principal	☐	☐
I go to school events, e.g. plays, games, concerts etc.	☐	☐
I talk about the school to other parents	☐	☐
I go to talks and classes organised for parents by the school	☐	☐
I help out in this school	☐	☐
I give money towards fundraising events in this school	☐	☐
I have a copy of the school rules and/or Code of Behaviour	☐	☐
I attend parent-teacher and other school meetings	☐	☐
I help organise the fundraising and events in this school	☐	☐
I am or have been a member of the Parents' Association in this school	☐	☐
I go to talks and classes organised for parents outside this school	☐	☐
I have met my child's teacher	☐	☐
I help out in my child's class	☐	☐
I know the standard of learning and teaching in this school	☐	☐
I go to activities (AGM, fundraisers, talks etc.) run by the Parents' Association	☐	☐
I am or have been a member of the Board of Management in this school	☐	☐
I am a member of a group (sporting or community etc.) outside the school	☐	☐

List the group(s) you are involved with outside the school:

6. What are your views on the following?

Put a black mark in your chosen space beside each answer: strongly agree, disagree, not sure, disagree or strongly disagree

	strongly agree	agree	not sure	disagree	strongly disagree
I feel welcome in this school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The teachers listen to me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have a say in school policies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school tells me what is happening	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have a say in what is happening in this school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can make a complaint in this school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can talk to the teacher about my child	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

7. About, how often do you?

Put a black mark in your chosen space beside each answer: strongly agree, disagree, not sure, disagree or strongly disagree

	every day	every week	every month	once a year	never
Help your child with homework	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Pay for school items e.g. pencils, copies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Write notes to your child's school/teacher	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Read notes sent home by the school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Read stories to your child	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Play games with your child	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Bring your child to Church	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Look at your child's copies and workbooks	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Bring your child to the library	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Talk to your child's teacher	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Bring your child on outings e.g. cinema, park	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. What activities does your child do outside school hours?

Put a black mark in the space(s) beside your answer(s)

- Art ☐
- Music ☐
- Drama ☐
- Sport ☐
- Scouts or Guides ☐
- Youth Club ☐
- Computers ☐

List any other activities he or she does outside school?

9. What are your views on the following?

Put a black mark in your chosen space for each statement: Strongly agree, disagree, not sure, disagree or strongly disagree

	strongly agree	agree	not sure	disagree	strongly disagree
Education should be left to the teachers who are the experts					
Mothers are primarily responsible for their children's education					
Parents do not need a copy of the School Plan					
Parents should always put their children's needs before their own					
Parents are the most important teachers of their children					
Schools need to keep parents up-to-date on curriculum changes					
Parents should make their children obey their teachers					
Fathers are not responsible for their children's education					
The Catholic values of the school are very important					
Schools should keep parents up-to-date on how their children are getting on					
Parents need help from teachers to educate their children					

10. Who do you think is responsible for?

Put a black mark in your chosen space for each statement: parents, teachers, both parents and teachers or neither parents nor teachers

	parents	teachers	both parents and teachers	neither parents nor teachers
Children doing their homework				
Children being able to read and write				
Children wearing the correct uniform				
Children having religious values				
Children going to school every day				
Children behaving well in school				
Children mixing well with other children				
Children being good citizens				
Children having their own books, pencils and copies				
Children being able to do their maths				
Children being good Catholics				

11. Where do you get support and advice on bringing up and educating your child?

Put a black mark in as many spaces as you wish

Partner	Your children	Child's teachers	Other Parents
Family	Neighbours	Social Workers	Public Health Nurse
Doctor	Church	Parenting Course	School Principal
Gardai	Internet	Books	Therapist
Friends	Television	Your own parents	Home School Teacher
			Newspapers or magazines

12. In Ireland *Put a black mark in your chosen space for each statement: true, false or don't know*

	true	false	don't know
Parents can be taken to court if their child does not attend school			
The Board of Management must keep parents informed on school matters			
Parents have no right to see their children's school records			
Every parent should get a copy of the school's code of behaviour			
Parents are not allowed to see the school's financial accounts			
If children are not in school for 20 days in a full school year, the school must report them to the Education Welfare Officer			
There are no parents on a school's Board of Management			
Parents can appeal to the Department of Education if a school refuses to enrol their child			
Schools do not have to consult parents on their policies			
A revised curriculum has been introduced in Irish primary schools			

13. Are you in? *Put a black mark in the space beside your answer*

- full-time paid employment ☐
- part-time paid employment ☐
- not in paid employment ☐

14. Are you an? *Put a black mark in the space beside your answer*

- Irish citizen ☐
- EU citizen excluding Ireland ☐
- Non-EU citizen ☐

15. Did you go to ? *Put a black mark in the space beside your answer*

- Primary School ☐
- Secondary School ☐
- Third Level ☐
- Other: ☐

If other, please specify:

_____

16. At present, how many of your children are *Put a black mark in the space beside your answer*

- too young for pre-school ☐
- at pre-school ☐
- in primary school ☐
- in secondary school ☐
- under 16 and not attending school ☐
- at third level ☐
- working ☐
- unemployed ☐

17. How many children have you? ☐

18. Write down three changes you have noticed in schools over the last six years?

19. Please include any comments you would like to make on parental involvement in children's education and schools *(Extra comments can be written on the back of this page)*

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire.
Your help and co-operation is very much appreciated.
Josephine Bleach (086 8153600)

Appendix 4: Interviews and Focus Groups

4.1 Letter to Parents

21.02.06

Dear Parents / Guardians,

National policy, as outlined in the Education Act 1998, Education Welfare Act 2000 and the Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999), promotes partnership between home and school.

As part of my PhD Degree with Trinity College, Dublin, I am examining the impact of this national policy of partnership on parents and their involvement in their children's education. In this study, I hope to investigate, from the perspective of parents with primary school children, how this aspect of national policy is implemented at local level.

As the views of parents are central to this study, I am looking for parents who are willing to be interviewed on their experience of parental involvement in their children's education and primary schools.

While the interviews will be recorded, your replies will be held in the strictest confidence and no one apart from myself will have access to them. Moreover, individual views or schools will not be identified in the research document.

If you are interested in taking part in the interviews, please fill in the form below by the **9th March 2006** and return it to the school in the enclosed envelope.

If you require any further details please contact me at the above address and phone numbers and I will be happy to supply the relevant information.

Thank you,
Yours sincerely,

_____

Josephine Bleach

If you wish to be interviewed as part of this research, please fill in this form and return in the enclosed envelope to the school by **Thursday 9th March 2006**

Name: _____ Phone No.: _____

Address: _____

Days you may be available for interview: _____

Times you may be available for interview: _____

4.2 Pilot Interview Schedule

Introduction:
Explain purpose of the interview
Format and rules

- Your opinion is important
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- You have a right to refuse to answer any question you want or to stop the interview at any time
- Permission to tape the interview
- I will be taking notes
- The interview will be anonymous and no one apart from myself will have access to the tape/notes.
- There will be nothing in the report to identify you.

1. Influences:

a) How did you decide to send your child to this school?
b) How will you decide what school you will send them to next? (Secondary or senior primary)
c) How important is the Catholic ethos of the school to you?
d) What or who influences your decisions around your child's education and schooling?
e) How do they help you to make the decision?
f) If you felt or thought that your child was not happy or had a problem in school, what would you do?
Why would you handle it this way?
g) If you felt or thought that your child was not learning or was falling behind in school, what would you do?

2. Relationship with school:

a) What are the qualities of a good school?
b) What, do you think, helps children do well at school?
c) How, in your opinion, can schools and parents work together for the benefit of children?
d) What issues or problems can arise between the school and parents?
e) What, in your opinion, is the best way to sort them out?
f) How can parents help?
g) How can the school help?
h) How can individual teachers help?

3. Role

a) How would you describe yourself as a parent?
b) How, do you feel, parents should deal with their children in the following
    - *Education*
    - *Behaviour*
    - *Imparting values*
    - *Religion*

c) What, do you feel, is the role of the *mother* in child rearing and education?
d) What, do you feel, is the role of the *father* in child rearing and education?
e) Who supports you in this role?

f) What is the role of teachers in children's education?
g) Can teachers over step the mark and take over some of the parents' role?
h) If so, how?

i) What, do you see, is the role of the following in your children's education?

- School
- State
- The Catholic Church/parish

j) What role can parents play to ensure that each of these meet children's educational needs?

4 Information:

a) How informed would you say you are about your child's

- *Learning and progress in school*
- *Behaviour in school*
- *Interests and friends in school*
- *What is going on in the school*
- *School rules and policies*

b) Where do you get this information?
c) Are you happy with the quantity and quality of this information?
d) What might make a difference?

5 Involvement:

a) How involved are you with your children's

- School
  - *Attend events and meetings*
  - *Help out in the school*
  - *Parents' Association – informal or formal*
  - *BOM*
- Education outside school
  - *Extra-curricular activities*
  - *Games*
  - *Stories*
  - *Outings*
  - *Homework*
- Community/parish organisations and groups

b) What helps you to become involved?
c) What stops you becoming involved?
d) What is the difference between parental involvement and interference?

6. Decision-making and governance:

a) What say do you think parents should have in

- *Running the school*
- *Deciding the school rules*
- *What is taught to their child*

b) How much of a say do you think you have?
c) What helps or hinders you in having a say?

7 Changes:

a) What changes have you noticed in schools and education over the last few years?
b) How have they affected your children?
c) How have they affected you as a parent?

- *Attendance*
- *Behaviour*
- *Curriculum*
- *Involvement of parents*

d) What do you think of the changes?

8 Variables:

a) Ask

- Number and age of children
- Working in paid employment
- One or two parent family

9 Conclusion:

Any further comments
If you want a copy of the interview, give me your name, phone number and address, I will send it to you.
I will give you my name, address and phone number if you have any further comments to add.

4.3 Interview Schedule

Introduction:
Explain purpose of the interview
Format and rules

- Your opinion is important
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- You have a right to refuse to answer any question you want or to stop the interview at any time
- Permission to tape the interview
- I will be taking notes
- The interview will be anonymous and no one apart from myself will have access to the tape/notes.
- There will be nothing in the report to identify you.

1. Parental decisions and influences:

How many children have you?
What ages are they?
What schools are they in?

What do you want for your children or what are your hopes for them?
What do you think you are doing to make those hopes come true?
How does the school fit in?

What are your fears for them?
What are you doing about them?
How does the school help?

How did you decide to send your child to this school?
How, do you think, you will decide what school you will send them to next? (Secondary or senior primary)
What, to you, are the qualities of a good school?

- What would encourage you to send your child to a particular school?
- What would encourage your child to attend school?

How important is the Catholic ethos of the school to you?
Would you send your child to a school that was non-Catholic? Why?

What or who influences your decisions around your child's education and schooling?
How do they help you to make the decision?

2. Roles

a) How would you describe yourself as a parent?
c) What, do you feel, is the *mother's job* in child rearing and education?
d) What, do you feel, is the *father's job* in child rearing and education?
e) Who supports you in this role?
e.g. teachers, other parents, family members

f) How would you describe the teacher's job in children's education?
g) Where does the teacher's work stop and the parent's begin?

h) Where does the parents' work stop and the teacher's begins?

i) What, do you see, is the role or job of the following in your children's education?
- State/government/Department of Education – schools, curriculum, money
- The Catholic Church/parish – manage schools, religious values
- School

j) What can parents do to ensure that each of these (state/government/DES, Church and school) meet children's educational needs?

3. Behaviour:

What are your top two rules at home?
How do you encourage your children to obey them?
What do you do if they disobey them?

What are the top two school rules?
How does the school encourage children to obey them?
What happens when your child breaks these rules?

What is your job in relation to these rules?
How do you find out about the school rules?
What say have you in making these rules?
What if there is a rule that you disagree with or feel is unreasonable (having to write lines, lunches, jewellery etc.), what would you do?

How would you say that your child is getting on in school? Behaviour, Friendship
How do you help the child fit in and cope with school?

If you felt or thought that your child was not happy or had a problem in school, what would you do?
- Fighting with others or messing continually
- Being bullied
- Being punished unfairly

4. Learning

How would you say that your child doing in school? Maths, English,
How do you get information about how your child is progressing in school?

Can you tell me something that they are learning at the moment?
How do you get information about what s/he is learning in school?
What say have you in what they learn in school?

What you do if you felt that they were learning something that was too hard or inappropriate e.g. adverts (John), videos?
If you felt that the teacher was not covering the work or not teaching the children's properly what would you do?
If copies or homework were not being corrected, what would you do?

How do you help or support your child's learning?
- *School-related activities*
- *Home*

If you felt or thought that your child was not learning or was falling behind in school, what would you do?

- Bored with or not interested in school
- Upset or worried that they couldn't learn something or weren't doing it right

What do you think helps children do well at school?
How, in your opinion, can schools and parents work together for the benefit of children?

5. Relationship with school:

How would you describe your relationship with your children's school?

a) How informed would you say you are w*hat is going on in the school (activities, events, decisions, policies)?*
b) Where do you get this information?
c) Are you happy with the quantity and quality of this information?
d) What might make a difference?

a) How involved are you with your children's

- School
    - *Attend events and meetings*
    - *Help out in the school*
    - *Formation of school rules and policies*
    - *Parents' Association – informal or formal*
    - *BOM*
- Education outside school
    - *Extra-curricular activities*
    - *Games*
    - *Stories*
    - *Outings*
    - *Homework*
- Community/parish organisations and groups

b) What helps you to become involved?
c) What stops you becoming involved?
b) How much of a say do you think you have?
c) What helps or hinders you in having a say?

If the school sends home a policy and there was something in it that you disagreed with, what would you do?
d) What is the difference between parental involvement and interference?

6. Changes:

a) What changes have you noticed in schools and education over the last few years?

- *Attendance*
- *Behaviour*
- *Curriculum*
- *Involvement of parents*

b) How have they affected your children?

c) How have they affected you as a parent?
d) What do you think of the changes?

7. Variables:

a) Ask

- Working in paid employment
- One or two parent family
- Religion
- Citizenship

8. Conclusion:

Any further comments

If you want a copy of the interview, give me your name, phone number and address, I will send it to you.

I will give you my name, address and phone number if you have any further comments to add.

4.4 Transcribed Interview with Disadvantaged Mother (I7DM) (20-06-06)

1. Parental decisions and influences:

How many children have you?
Three
What ages are they?
Eleven, nine and six
Are they girls or boys?
2 girls and 1 boy
What age is the boy?
He is eleven. He's the eldest

What do you want for your children or what are your hopes for them?
Hopefully that they will do well at school and go on and get a good job.
How far do you want them to go on?
Well hopefully on to College
What do you think you are doing to make those hopes come true?
Well I help out at Maths for Fun. If there is anything in the school and they need a hand I will come over

What are your fears for them?
My fears – going out in to that big world
Why?
Ah, when I was younger you hadn't got what's going on now. There's an awful lot more going on now than there was when I was younger so they have to be wary when they get out there.
What are you doing about them?
I suppose just keep a good eye on them and bring them up properly, give them the best start in life
How does the school help?
They don't help because basically they are here to learn, and hopefully - but if they haven't learnt by the time they have left, they don't want to learn. Hopefully they'll learn
While they're here
Yeah

How did you decide to send your child to this school?
They weren't here at the start. They went to an Irish school first but it didn't work out. I had to take them out.
I was recommended an Irish school and I sent them back here because it didn't work out.
In what ways did it not work out?
The little fella wasn't able for English. His English was suffering. The girl, who is nine, her English suffered as well. The boy still has problems now with his English. I came to this school myself.
Who recommended the Irish school?
I had them in the Irish pre-school in …….. The new Gaelscoil in [the area] was only starting up and they asked us in the pre-school would we put them in and give it a shot and we did and it didn't work out.
What are the schools you are thinking of sending them to next?
Well the boy will go to [secondary school outside the area]
That's in ……

What about your daughter?
Well he's not going to the Comp.
Why not?
There is too much going on in the Comp. I went to the Comp and I have nothing against the girl's side but they are interacting now – boys and girls together and there is nothing but trouble. They finish school earlier if there is any sign of trouble. The classes are finished and they are sent them home and the girl hopefully is going to – is it St .... or St ..... down at the..... ..... is it or St.....'s?
St..... 's?
Yeah, St.....'s
Have you her name down there?
No, I will have to do that
What age is she?
She's nine
Have you considered any other schools?
No, well he is going to [secondary school outside the area]

What, to you, are the qualities of a good school?
Discipline, good discipline
Anything else?
That they don't take any messing and if there is ever a problem you can go straight up to the school and get the problem sorted straight away.

How important is the Catholic ethos of the school to you?
Pause It'd be important, you know what I mean but they don't go to Mass. They don't but if there is anything going on in the school they could participate in it
Would you send your child to a school that was non-Catholic?
No
Why not?
I just wouldn't *laughter*

What or who influences your decisions around your child's education and schooling?
Who influences me? Well I suppose I went to on to 6th year and did a secretarial course so I think that they are better off staying in school as long as they can and getting all the qualifications that they can. There is no point in dropping out second, third year and then they have no qualifications. They are not going to get anywhere.
Who encouraged you to send him to[secondary school outside the area]?
My friend – my friend has her boy down there. Now he's doing his Junior Cert. She actually recommended [secondary school outside the area] for me and his teacher as well, his teacher, he plays for the [local GAA club] and he recommends [secondary school outside the area] as well.
Is it is his coach?
His teacher in the [school] and he takes the training as well. So they said it was a good school.

2. Roles

How would you describe yourself as a parent?
I would hope to think that I have a good influence on them. They're learning from me.

What, do you feel, is the mother's job in child rearing and education?

The mother's role - well my role is to get them here to school every day and to get them the best education that they can get. Get them to school on time

What, do you feel, is the father's job in child rearing and education?
Basically the same as mine but my role I probably have that bit more say.
Why would you have more say?
O, I'm on my own. I don't have a partner. Anything I decide - I make all the decisions.
Do they see their Dad?
Yeah, well the littlest one does, the other two don't and he's great like that, he'd come over if there are meetings or anything, he'd come over for the parent-teacher meeting and all that and if there are any problems he'd go up to the school, but at the end of the day the decision would be left to me

e) Who supports you in this role?
I have me mother and I have five sisters
And how do they help you out?
Well, my sister now that lives near me, she's very good now. Her young one had dyslexia and she was telling me what to watch out for Jamie, to keep an eye on him. We have actually discovered this year that there is actually a problem. She would now.
Is there anyone else that support or help out?
Well they all do – in their own little way they'd all help me

How would you describe the teacher's job in children's education?
Well, nowadays it is very hard.
Why would you say that?
Well not looking at a primary school but looking at a secondary school, I think it's gone very hard. The stories that you hear about what is going on in the comprehensive, it's got harder.

What, do you see, is the role or job of the State/government/Department of Education in children's education?
Pause They supply the teachers don't they? Isn't that up to them to make sure that we have enough of teachers so that the school can be run properly.

How about the Catholic Church/parish?
The Church – the [name of church] has a lot to do with it. The Chaplain is over here every day during the week. They have the little welcome meetings when the little kids start school, then the communion and confirmation.

What about the school
Well I know that at the end of the day that they're here to teach the children but it's whether the children want to learn, I suppose. All they can do is do their best.

What can parents do to ensure that each of these (state/government/DES, Church and school) do their best for children?
I suppose you'd have to be on the committee, wouldn't you, you know what I mean. I know that there is a committee here and I suppose they'd, if they didn't think that they weren't doing their job properly, they would do something about it.

3. Behaviour:

What are your top two rules at home?
Top two rules – homework is to be done before they go out to play. Ahem, just once their home work is done and that they behave, you know what I mean, no fighting or anything like that. Once the homework is done they can go out.

How do you encourage your children to obey them?
Well if they don't do their homework when they come in they are not allowed out to play or they can't go to their club.
What club do they go to?
They go to [name of club] and his club is on – the boys is on a Wednesday and the girls is on a Thursday and then they have swimming lessons on a Friday. They have their Irish dancing classes.

What do you do if they disobey you?
They would be grounded. *laughter*

What are the top two school rules?
Top two school rules – I suppose behave well and treat the other pupils with respect.

How does the school encourage children to obey them?
I think they have a Code, don't they? I am not too sure - I think they have a Code

What happens when your child breaks these rules?
I suppose if they broke the rules they'd get a little bit of extra homework. They probably mightn't be allowed out on to yard. You have to stay in from the yard if you were fighting in the yard.
What is your job in relation to these rules?
I wouldn't have a problem with the school rules because you need something there for the children to know that they have to be obeyed.

How do you find out about the school rules?
Because it is in the back of the journal. In the back of the journal, the school's code, I think it is called. There is about eleven of them. They're in the back of the journal.

What say have you in making these rules?
I suppose you would have a say. If the rules weren't working out, I suppose, you could come to [principal] and discuss them and work out something else with her.
What if there is a rule that you disagree with, what would you do?
I'd come over to [principal] and tell her that I don't think that rule is appropriate.
Would she listen to you?
Oh yeah, she would, she's very nice. If there is a problem, you can go straight to her, whether it is something small or something big she will sort it out straight there and then.

How do you help the child fit in and cope with school?
I'd come over and help with Maths for Fun

If you felt or thought that your child was not happy or had a problem in school, what would you do?

I'd be over to [principal] to see if there was something going on, if there was something happening, I didn't know about.
What about the child's teacher?
Well I'd go to her first and if she couldn't sort the problem out, and well then we'd have to go to [principal].

4. Learning

How do you get information about how your child is progressing in school?
They have a parent-teacher meeting but if there was homework that was sent home and they couldn't manage with it, I would - well I bring them to school every morning so I'd pop up and ask how they are getting on. As you're doing the homework with them, you can see how they are doing.

What you do if you felt that they were learning something that was too hard or inappropriate?
Well I would sit down and try and if I couldn't show her how to do it, I go back to the teacher and say, 'Listen, could you show [name of child] again because she wasn't able for the Maths last night or the English.'

How do you help or support your child's learning at home?
The books – they have books, they get books for Christmas and their birthdays and I try to encourage them to read books.
Anything else?
Silence
Is there anything else outside school?
Well as I said they have their clubs. They do their Irish dancing. The little fella plays football and Gaelic so we try to keep them busy.

What do you think helps children do well at school?
Pause Give them a good education, I suppose. If they get the right education and if they want to put in the work.
Pause
Is there anything else that helps them do well at school?
I suppose if they want to get a good job that they will study and learn and pass their exams

How, in your opinion, can schools and parents work together for the benefit of children?
I hope my part is to come – the teacher teaches them here at school so when they come home I will help them with their homework or if they have any problems.

5. Relationship with school:

How would you describe your relationship with your children's school?
Well I think, as I do say, I see the teachers every morning, I think, I would like to think that I have a good relationship because - I don't bring the little boy to school, he goes himself but I do drop off the [one child] first and then [other child] and I'd know most of the teachers, like I went here myself.

How informed would you say you are what is going on in the school (activities, events, decisions, policies)?
Very informed because if there is anything going on there'd be a little letter sent home.

Are you happy with the quantity and quality of this information?
Yes, there is a little newsletter sent out, I think, at the end of each term and that has everything that has happened. If there was fund raising and how much they made and if somebody's sister had a little brother or what ever. It is all put in the newsletter at the end of each term.

Is there any other information you think you should be getting?
No

a) How involved are you with the school – meetings and events?
O, I 'd come to any meeting that was on.

You are not involved with the Parents' Association?
No,
Why not?
Because I work, I work part time so
We were doing one of the courses over there so it would be probably a bit hard to combine the two of them.
What course was it?
It was one of them Fetac courses – child care course wasn't it? I think it was a Fectac course that we were doing
Did you enjoy it?
Yeah, it was very good

How about Community/parish organisations and groups?
No

What helps people to become involved?
I'd be involved in the likes of the clubs is, I suppose if it's things for children that you would get out and get involved. Like when they were trying to save the swimming pool, the likes of everyone got out and tried to stop them closing the pool.
There is a new pool now.
That taken over privately but now it taken back over by Dublin City Council.
I have never been in it
It's very small.
There seems to be a play area there.
Yeah, it is not a proper swimming pool. There are no lanes in it or nothing
They tried to keep swimming pool open but it didn't work
Why do you think it didn't work?
Because I think that the whole place is being taken over by private companies to be honest and they are not leaving anything for kids. The only club that I know of in [area] is the one that [leader of the club] does so they are getting smaller.

What stops people becoming involved?
Well, I'd say that some of them wouldn't have the time, they'd be out working like myself or they small kids and just wouldn't have the time. And then well, they just probably don't want to. You know what I mean, you will always get some people that doesn't want to, couldn't be bothered.
Why would you think that they couldn't be bothered?
Maybe because it doesn't affect them and they probably think that it's got nothing to do with me so why should I go out and do it.

How much of a say do you think you have in the school?
Well I suppose if you weren't happy and had something to say that [the principal] would sit down and listen to you. I think you would have a say, yes

What would stop people coming up, now she will obviously listen to you, but what could stop people coming up?
Well I don't think that anything would
Phone rings
What about other schools?
I wouldn't really know much about other schools except that my kids went to the Irish school. I only know this school from coming
If the school sends home a policy and there was something in it that you disagreed with, what would you do?
With the policy *Pause* Well, I suppose again you'd have to come up to [principal] and say that you don't agree with. I suppose she'd have to do something about it because you wouldn't be the only one who be – she'd probably have to sit down and work something out

6. Changes:
a) What changes have you noticed in schools and education over the last few years?
Well this year now they have brought in the Jolly Phonics, which I think is great. Like I said the Maths for Fun. We never had anything like that, never had anything like that and it makes it much easier.
We have a resource teacher now – we never had that like – I suppose we used to have a reading teacher. But this is a resource – now my young fella – he's going to be going to [name of teacher] for Jolly Phonics and that's a one-on-one, which we didn't – now we did go to reading classes but we didn't have anyone who would sit there and work with you one on one. Even if it is just twenty minutes or half an hour, it makes a hell of a lot of difference
Have you noticed any other changes?
The introduction of the breakfast club, which is great
In what way does that help?
Well, my kids won't eat breakfast at home but yet they'll get up, get dressed and be out the door at half eight to be at the breakfast club. Well then again I suppose you have some Mammy's that work and they can drop them at the breakfast club and then again if kids aren't getting a breakfast in the home, the school - it is there to provide because they need breakfast. There is no point in going to school without a breakfast because you are not going to concentrate. You'll have no concentration.

I hope that wasn't too hard.
No, it was grand. I was a bit worried but I hope you got a bit of information.

7. Variables:
- Working in paid employment – part time
- One parent family
- Religion – non-practising Catholic
- Citizenship - Irish

4.5 Pilot Focus Group Schedule

Introduction:
Explain purpose of focus group
Format and rules

- Every one's opinion is important
- Everyone to have a say so please try to wait until others have spoken before speaking again.
- People have different views and that is ok. I want to hear them all.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- Permission to tape the interview
- I will be taking notes

1. Information:

a) What information do parents need from schools?
   - *Policies and plans*
   - *Children's progress*
   - *On-going events and decision*

b) How good are schools at keeping parents informed?
c) Give me a few examples
d) What information might schools need from parents?
e) How might communication between home and school be improved?

2. Roles:

a) What, in your opinion, is the role of parents in their children's education?
b) How do you think society sees parents?
   - *Fathers*
   - *Mothers*

c) How do teachers see parents?

d) What is the role of teachers in children's education?
e) Can teachers over step the mark and take over some of the parents' role?
f) If so, how?

g) What, do you see, is the role of the following in your children's education?

- School
- State
- The Catholic Church/parish

3. Involvement:

a) How can parents become involved in their children's education?
   - *School*
   - *Home curriculum*
   - *Influencing education policy at national level*

b) What encourages parents to become involved?
c) What discourages or prevents them from becoming involved?

If you felt that the teacher was not covering the work or not teaching the children's properly what would you do?
If copies or homework were not being corrected, what would you do?

If you felt or thought that your child was not learning or was falling behind in school, what would you do?

- Bored with or not interested in school
- Upset or worried that they couldn't learn something or weren't doing it right

d) What is the, or is there a, difference between parental involvement and parental interference?

4. Decision-making and governance

a) What say do you think parents should have in
  - Running the school
  - Deciding the school rules
  - What is taught to their children

b) How much of a say do parents in this school have?
If the school sends home a policy and there was something in it that you disagreed with, what would you do?

5. Changes

a) What changes have you noticed in schools and education over the last few years?
b) How have they affected your children?
c) How have they affected you as parents?
  - *Attendance*
  - *Behaviour*
  - *Curriculum*
  - *Involvement of parents*

d) What do you think of the changes?

6. Support

a) What kind of support do parents need to educate their children?
b) How do the following support parents?
- State/society
- Church/parish
- School

c) How do parents support themselves?
d) How could these supports be improved?
e) What support do schools need from parents

7. Influences:

a) When parents are making decision about their children's education e.g. choosing a school, where do they go for information?
b) Who or what, do you think, influences their decisions the most?

8. Relationship with school

a) What are the qualities of a good school?
b) What kind of relationship should parents have with schools?
c) What issues or problems can arise between schools and parents?
d) What is the best way, in your opinion to sort them out?

9. Conclusion:

Any further comments

If anyone wants a copy of the interview, if they give me their name, phone number and address, I will send it to them.

I will give you my name, address and phone number if you have any further comments to add.

4.6 Focus Group Schedule

Introduction:
Explain purpose of focus group
Format and rules

- Every one's opinion is important
- Everyone to have a say so please try to wait until others have spoken before speaking again.
- People have different views and that is ok. I want to hear them all.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- Permission to tape the interview
- I will be taking notes

1. What are the qualities of a good school?

2. Influences:
When parents are making decision about their children's education e.g. choosing a school, how do they decide?
Where might they go for information?
Who or what, do you think, influences their decisions the most?

3. Roles:

e) What, in your opinion, is the role/job/work of parents in their children's education?
   - *Fathers*
   - *Mothers*

Who supports or gives you a hand as parents in looking after and educating your children?

d) What is the role of the school and teachers in children's education?
How do they support parents?

g) What, do you see, is the role of the following in your children's education?
What support do they give parents in educating their children?

- School
- State
- The Catholic Church/parish

4. Relationship with school
What kind of relationship should parents have with schools? *How should the parent get on with the school?*

How do think the school/teachers see parents?

What issues or problems can arise between schools and parents? *What things might parents need sort out with school e.g.*

If you felt that the teacher was not covering the work or not teaching the children's properly what would you do?

If copies or homework were not being corrected, what would you do?

If you felt or thought that your child was not learning or was falling behind in school, what would you do?
If you child was upset or worried that they couldn't learn something or weren't doing it right?

What is the best way, in your opinion to sort them out?

5. Information:

f) What information do parents need from schools?
- *Policies and plans*
- *Children's progress*
- *On-going events and decision*

g) How good are schools at keeping parents informed?
h) Give me a few examples
i) What information might schools need from parents?
j) How might communication between home and school be improved?

6. Involvement:

a) How can parents become involved in their children's education?
- *School*
- *Home curriculum*
- *Influencing education policy at national level*

b) What encourages parents to become involved?
c) What discourages or prevents them from becoming involved?
What is the, or is there a, difference between parental involvement and parental interference?

7. Decision-making and governance

a) What say do you think parents should have in
- Running the school
- Deciding the school rules
- What is taught to their children

b) How much of a say do parents in this school have?

If the school sends home a policy and there was something in it that you disagreed with, what would you do?

8. Changes

a) What changes have you noticed in schools and education over the last few years?
b) How have they affected your children?
c) How have they affected you as parents?
- *Attendance*
- *Behaviour*
- *Curriculum*
- *Involvement of parents*

d) What do you think of the changes?

9. What is the most important thing parents do for their children?
Who/What helps them?

If you had one piece of advice to give to a new parent with a child starting school, what would it be?

10. Conclusion:
Any further comments
If anyone wants a copy of the interview, if they give me their name, phone number and address, I will send it to them.
I will give you my name, address and phone number if you have any further comments to add.

4.7 Transcribed Focus Group with Middle Class Mothers (FG2M) (11-05-06)

Both of these parents are on the Parents Association. One had volunteered for the interviews anyhow. Both were not working outside the home and had similar attitudes. They each reinforced and extended on what the other way saying.

How long are you in the Parents' Association?
P1: I'm in it four years.

P2: I'm in it five years

You're great. It is very hard to keep it up.
P2: You get fed up every now and then but then you kind of go, well if you don't go, nobody will
Really and how many parents do you have on it?
P1: Well I will put it this way. There is a list of about 11 of us but about 8 regulars that will show up to everything

P2: Every single thing and they will be the first in with money and they will be the first in at a meeting, the first to offer to help and the first to do this and the first to do that but then you have to appreciate that other people just wouldn't have that time as well
So other people will come whenever they can, which is fair enough
And then there are some people who can't come to meetings in the evenings because maybe their husbands are working in the evenings or whatever but they would often say to you if you want help with fund raising, give us a shout or if you want me to make sandwiches, or you want me ever to do anything, give me a shout and that's great to know that there is someone there if you are stuck.

1. What are the qualities of a good school?

P1: To be able to, I'd say approachable
Open, that you are able come in if there is a problem straight away without having to be hanging around for a week or two making for appointments.
I know
P1 : I must say I'd find that very frustrating.
What are the other qualities of a good school?
P1: I'd say discipline but with a little bit of flexibility also in the sense that some schools would be highly disciplined and don't show any flexibility, whereas I think that this school, it is disciplined but they are flexible in their discipline if you know what I mean. They'd treat each child differently if they had to, in the best interests of the child.

P2: They'd do a reward system

P1: The rewards are good, because, they make a big thing about you being good, I think more so than being corrected when you are bold.

2. Influences:
When parents are making decision about their children's education e.g. choosing a school, how do they decide?
P2: O word of mouth, very much I think. It is nearly 100% what you hear, you know, down in the church, or what you hear around, you are very influenced, well I think people are very influenced

P1: I think if you know children that have gone though a school,

P2: Yes, definitely

P1: You look at how they are turning out

P2: Definitely

P1: I think. That is why I sent [name of son] here, though even though I live next door anyway. But I was - I would have been rather negative for a while because I wouldn't have been used to kids, boys especially. You see the high jinks and coming in and pushing and shoving and shouting until I had my own young fella

P2: And then you realise that every school is like that

You realise that every school is like that. *Chorus*

P1: It's what boys are

P2: That's what they do

That's what they do *Chorus*

P2: I think the day where people just sent their boys or girls to the parish school, that day is gone, everyone tries to find a school to suit their child now

P1: Or it might be where you work

P2: Yeah, physicality has a lot to do with it now as well. If a school is beside your mum and your mum minds your children, you're going to send them there

P1: Yeah, kind of a bit of both, people are different

Principal interrupts to check we're all right and to say he's leaving

If people wanted more information, beside word of mouth, where might they go for information?
Not that I am aware of. *Chorus*

P2: They'd go to the school. Let's say you pick out the four schools that would be handy for you and you'd go to each school and find out for yourself directly from the school.

What information would you get from them?

P1: You'd get the policy and procedures manual

What, do you think, influences their decisions the most?

P1: I'd say word of mouth. If you know a child that has got on well and was happy. You know like how a child is, if they are not happy here or, you sort of get turned off by hearing stories. But once the kids are happy and you know they are happy in school, I suppose that would influence you more so than any thing else, wouldn't it?

P2: Absolutely, I can't see why.... The only thing I suppose is maybe if it was your parish school and it was a good school I'd say that an awful lot of the children would just automatically fall in. I found that now with [middle class girls' school]. Like there was never a question of going anywhere else to school because it had a fantastic name and it was a parish school so the issue never arose as to where you were going to send a girl if you had a girl. Sure it wasn't? There was never any, 'I might consider there'. 'I might consider there'. They were going to [middle class girls' school] and that was it. They were delighted to have it and that was it

P1: But I always think that you should send them to the local school anyway because of their friends and after school, you know like. If they are making, if you sent them over to

[another area] or wherever, just because you work over there and you are carting over and back and their friends are over there, good God, who'd put up with it.

P2: That's not a consideration when they are younger but when they are older and they want to go in fifth class up to John's house and John is like two bus stops away,

P1: Oh no

P2: Or two bus journeys away, it becomes difficult then.

3. Roles:

What, in your opinion, is your role/job/work in your children's education?
P1: I think to keep a good eye on it. I think it is up to you really. The teacher can only do so much really. It is up to the parents to do the homework and if there is a problem to go in about it.

P2: Especially for small children, if you don't do the homework with them they are not going to do it.

P1: Absolutely not

What about the father's role?
P1: Depends on

P2: It very much depends on personality really. My husband never ever, ever, ever, ever looks at the homework because he knows that I would do all that. But I am sure now if I said 'I am not going to be here this evening, would you mind looking over the homework?', he would do it but it just a role that I assumed. Now I know in some houses there would a shared vote to it

What about main educational decisions? What input do you think fathers should have?
P2: 50-50 –

Oh Yeah!

P1: fathers

You're saying 50-50 but is it 50-50 in reality?
P2: No, it depends again. If you have a stay-at-home mum, whose been at home for maybe five, six, seven years prior to the child starting school, obviously she's going to have been networking and she is going to know things that their Dad is not going to know: 'Who so and so is? What school? Who? What happened? There's drugs where?' This is what you get.

I know

P2: I mean they can't be expected to because they haven't been there

I know yeah

P2: So then if you had a situation where the Mam and Dad are both working, then they are as ignorant and I don't mean that in a bad way

Yes, I know, they both won't have the network

P2: Yeah, so then it has to be a 50-50. They're going to just have to sit down and do their homework together and decide

P1: They are not in the school yard listening to

P2: Exactly; or in the supermarket every morning

P1: 'Cause that's where you hear it all

P2: That's exactly where you hear it all

P1: Talking to others

P2: Ear to the ground really

Okay, what about the mother's role?

P2: With the child at school

With the child's education and the child's learning and all that

P2: Well I think it's monumental, I think

P1: You have to be there

P2: You're the nurturer and if you haven't nurtured your child, the child isn't going to do anything really. No matter what they're learning in school if they are not being nurtured and cared for and brought on at home, it just isn't going to click with them, nothing is going to work

P1: You reinforce the work at home

P2: For example their reading – they read at school but if you don't encourage the child at home and do the reading with them at night before they go to bed, let them read, let you read and all that, sure how are they going to come on? They only get – they are only in school so many hours a day and there are so many subjects

P1: Sure they are only one person

P2: You have to do it

P1: They are only one person. They are only 1/30 or 31 of the class

P2: I don't think if we didn't do it with them I really can't understand how they ever would have learnt it

P1: Well you have to check it

P2: You establish the trend at home

P1: Without the help at home

P2: You have to drum it in to them

Who supports or gives you a hand as parents in looking after and educating your children?

P1: Well I'd say

P2: Their own parents for starters, they'd be your first port of call, I'd say, would you say

P1: I don't have any so I can't

P2: Well my first call would be.... What else would you do? Your best friend – you have a best friend

P1: I'd give Maria a ring

Laughter about her having friends

P1: I suppose yeah, I never had the problem, the issue really

P2: But you know if they came home and said so and so is bullying so and so, or something like that, like what would you do?

P1: Yeah, probably ring, yeah

P2: Your husband when he comes in then

P1: Yeah,

P2: Or some one that you know and respect and valued their opinion who already had

P1: I think I would ring another teacher from another school. I have a teacher friend so. They would be a lot of support because they would be dealing with the situation and would know.

P2: Somebody with experience. I'd never ring the Department of Education

Why?

P1: I wouldn't even think of it, would you?

P2: I just – I just never would. I know loads of people do

P1: I would never do that either

Why would they ring the Department of Education?

P2: If they weren't sure about what the school's policy was. If there was something happening at the school that they were not happy about and they needed to find out what is supposed to happen in these particular circumstances. But I have never come across any thing like that was that sort of

P1: Major

Yeah,

P2: But I am sure that if like there was somebody else here who has been through, I'm sure I am going to come across a problem at some stage and then maybe you would but as [other parent] said, if you have teacher friends they probably know anyway

P1: Probably would. What should have happened and what line should it take in this situation

P2: Yeah

d) What is the role of the school and teachers in children's education?
P2: What is the role of?

What is the role of the teacher in children's education?

P2: Well it is up to the school to employ the best man for the job, so somebody who fits their requirements. Like if you have, I don't know say, 40 boys starting off, you want someone young, you want someone energetic, you want somebody who is going to do after-school activities, you want someone - maybe somebody arty, you know the best man for the job, the best fit really, you are hoping that somebody will

P1: That's it basically

P2: There is no point taking somebody like on to teach 30 boys

P1: O God yes

Can it be a woman?

Oh yes absolutely (Chorus)

P2: Best woman, best person for the job

What about?

P2: And to keep them safe, safe like

Yeah

P2: They are in your care so that should be number one priority really. Once you leave them at the school gates, mind them, you have to keep them safe, we're gone

I know, yeah

How do you think the school and teachers support parents?
P2: This school?

This school or any school, how they should?

P2: How they should support parents?

Yeah or is it their job, do you know what I mean?

P2: Well I think so, yeah, like basically I think if there are any problems or issues, I think we should be the first person to know about it

P1: Yeah, yeah

P2: If your child is accused of bullying or maybe it's not bullying but it's perceived as bullying,

P1: Or involved in a fight or a row

P2: I think a phone call should follow as procedure.

P1: It is not as big as problem at the minute I think but if there's any issue or they are worried about something they should, or if they find like if the child suddenly slips backwards, you should be notified straight away

P2: Absolutely

What about the state, how should they support parents?
P2: They have to set the policy at say the higher level, which should go down, and the obvious things like budgets, they guarantee the funds, because you can't do anything if you have no money, so right at the early stage, even going back to which government is in power, like if you have someone in power who is big into education as Minister for Education, well you'll eventually after a couple years see that filtering through in to the system. Then the policies will be set at the Department level and they will come down. Like do you remember a couple of years ago when they started off the things about teacher parent, the teacher pupil ratio, I mean that has a big influence on things. Now down in [local girl's school], they've three and four cumulative classes now, where they have third and fourth

P1: Yeah, yeah

P2: Fifth and sixth. Maybe your girl is down in [middle class girls' school]

Explain that she goes to [local girls' school]

P2: That's a huge. Someone made a decision at Department level that this was going to be, depending on your quota, whether it was the right decision or not

P1: They lose a teacher

What is the role of the Catholic Church/parish?
P1: The Church – I suppose. Traditionally they had a big - like isn't there one in the Board of Management in these schools anyway?

P2: O, yeah

They own the school

P1: Do they own this one?

P2: Yeah, the [name of order] own this one

P1: Yeah, yeah! Well I don't think they have any influence, do they? I don't think they have much of an influence in this school

P2: Well this school maybe not but [local girls' school] school now, they probably have more of an influence, because they are near the Church and they are always popping in and out there

P1: Well, it's hard to know because really this is - I wouldn't even say that they are all Catholics in this school, are you?

P2: No - no, no they're not because there are three boys in [son's name] class that aren't Catholics

P1: But then I suppose it is the Catholic ethos in the school isn't it?

P2: Absolutely, I mean they are taught, they're taught

P1: Then what happens with the kids then, the other kids?

P2: Well they can stay or they can go

P1: Oh, right

P2: They can stay for it if they want. I suppose they have to read the religion book

P1: I suppose they have to cover the religions of the children in here

P2: No it is very much Catholic. They have to sit at the end

P1: Oh, my God

What about the parish?

P2: It's diminishing all the time, I'd say, that would be my perception, very little, in all honesty

What kind of

P2: I can give you an example of that in the sense that church seems to operate on a separate basis. There's the family mass on Sunday, the family mass procession, Good Friday, in the Church, you know, all those feast days. There is never anything from the school. That's done separately to a parish group. Like I would never get a note home from [son] saying that the parish mass is, the family mass is at 10.30 next Sunday, the procession will be - would your child like to go – you never get that. It is up to you to go and join the family mass group so that you can participate. It is not like down the country years ago, or even here years ago where, they would automatically assume, if they were in the Communion class, they'd be in the Holy Communion procession, that doesn't happen anymore

4. Relationship with school

What kind of relationship should parents have with schools?

P2: Well, it should be open doors.

P1: Well I know in this one is

P2: You should be made to feel that you can walk in at any time –

P1: Ring up to say that you are on your way or you are coming in or even out in the yard. This is - I know here, at half one, half two, you can just come in to the yard and the head teacher, [name of principal], is always there and you can just go up with any problem. I know of other schools where you have to ring, you have to make an appointment and you might get your appointment. I don't know

P2: Well if I had a serious problem, I would do that. I would ring and say I need to talk about this – I have never had to but I would but if it was just something like, I don't know, what happening to-morrow with the tour or whatever, we'd just say it to him and that's what he wants

How should the parent get on with the school?

P2: How should they? They should be active and supportive in the school life. You should be -- well isn't that very personal as some people don't think that you should develop any relationship.

Well my opinion is, I don't know about other opinions, but my opinion is that if you are not there or you're not at the meetings, you can't know, because your child is not going to tell you. They are only going to tell you the things that are important to them like so and so had two apples for his lunch like but sure that's no good.

I know, yeah

P2: If you don't make yourself available you are not going to hear things

How do think the school/teachers see parents in general?

P1: I often wonder about that

P2: It depends on the parent

Laughter

P2: You have to wonder about that sometimes

Why?

P2: Because sometimes I go 'God, are they sick looking at me or look at this one or something like that and then other times you think ah sure if you didn't go nobody would go, you know.' Do you feel like that?

P1: Well I never had any real issue here

P2: Neither did I you see

P1: So I have no experience

What issues or problems can arise between schools and parents? What things might parents need sort out with school e.g.

P1: God, I wouldn't know. I suppose the only time they really meet them - a lot of the parents would only meet the teachers at the parent teacher meetings and I suppose it

depends on what type of an earful they get at that. If you saw someone coming all the time really

P2: Yeah,

P1: If you weren't happy with the child here, why would you leave the child here? My attitude is that if I'm not happy with my child here and I feel I have to be up here every day there is something wrong. I just would actually - if I wasn't getting anywhere, I'd just take the child out and get him in somewhere else. I'd imagine that's what I would do

P2: Most issues can be resolved anyway

P1: Yeah

What are the problems or issues that can arise with schools?

P1: I think maybe the odd time people might, parents might think that their child is being picked on by teachers. You know, you are - they are only hearing one side, you know, I think lots of parents think that their kids are really innocent, sometimes I wonder, I know my young fella now, I've had to come in a few times, he's no angel but --

P2: You just have to accept that

P1: Sometimes I find that some of the teachers overreact a bit. Like I can't see how they can see what goes on with thirty kids all the time so if my young fella gets caught, he's just caught. He mightn't be any worse than anyone else but I know myself I don't make a big thing about it, just get on with it.

If you felt that the teacher was not covering the work, not correcting copy books or not teaching the children's properly what would you do?
P1: I'd do it myself and I have on occasion started off, when I thought that maybe it wasn't been covered.

P2: Well you could be wrong, very wrong. You could refer back to the book, you know the book we all got about your child's learning, you know that book that came out from the Department of Education– the long one – the half A4 one – you know that one

P1: I don't remember getting that book

The greenish one?

P2: The greenish blue one, I think

It came out about two years ago.

P2: Yeah, about two years ago. There is great source of referencing in that

P1: What is in it?

P2: It is what to do if you have a problem in here, here and here. There is a whole load of stuff in it. Then there was a DVD there recently

P1: Yeah, we have it, I haven't looked at it mind you but I have it there.

P2: I can't wait to see that because that will be, that seemingly will tell you exactly what they should be doing under each

Class

P2: for each class under each subject

P1: Oh, lovely

P2: That will be a great source because there was no Irish going on here. I thought that one year. I had a boy who didn't seem to be doing any Irish. I was getting really worried it and I was saying that I getting really worried about it but I suddenly found out that they weren't supposed to be doing any. The curriculum had changed. The Irish, it was all the, you know the old buntus and learning how to speak and all that and there was

P1: No book.

P2: No book, no writing or no spellings any more but I didn't know that. So I was fretting over nothing. You have to just ask, find out that's what I found

P1: I think we were the same because I remember we had bought the Irish books and other books and we were reading them. We were doing essays in English because they weren't doing essays anymore.

P2: No essays - I have wondered about that as well like. Ok so the curriculum might have changed for their ages in the primary school but it hasn't changed in secondary school so I wonder when they hit first year what is going to happen like? They won't have the same standard because they haven't been doing the same work anymore.

P1: I know a girl down in [middle class girls' school], she's in Junior Cert now. What she was doing down there was more than the boys were doing and then [son's name] and my neighbour, [son's name] was the same age as [girl's name] and they were in the same class, now [girl's name] was miles ahead but in a different way. He wasn't getting any homework but I think that once they went into secondary school they were on a par. There was no – there was no fuss about it

P2: That's interesting now

P1: [Girl's name] used to have two hours of homework and [boy's name] was never doing any.

P2: Now that is interesting

P1: I remember us getting a bit – very worried about it. Two of them from two different schools, two different classes and your woman was doing everything but nah, it didn't matter in the end then

P2: That's gas

5. Information:

What information do parents need from schools?

P2: Now I think the information we got on the DVD is brilliant. Now I haven't seen it but I have been told that this is what it is and I think that it's fantastic because that's their job is to educate the child so if you can monitor that, you know whether the job is being done or not. And then if the child is happy in the class apart from that, then overall everything is fine and as it should be

What other information do you think you get - things about events – letting you know what's going on?

P1: Oh we get all that, don't we?

P2: Yes we get a newsletter that tells us what's going on in the school,

P1: Twice a year or so

P2: Yes, the problem here is that on the Parents' Council that we hear it anyway so it's not an issue for us now, but you should, sorry but not telling you your job or anything, you should maybe ask someone who is not on the Parents Council may be that question because maybe

P1: You could find out that they are not informed

P2: There could be people out there, parents, who feel that they are told nothing at all and that may be so

Explained that I have sent out the questionnaire and got replies

P2: No we put up the minutes of the Parents' Councils meetings on the notice board so if you can't go to a meeting or even if you don't go to the meetings at all, if you go in and read those, then you are as much in the know, in inverted commas, as a parent who comes to them all because they are not edited. They are as was said.

How good are schools at keeping parents informed?
P1: Well the newsletter is the main thing I suppose for most people, for everybody.

P2: I feel I'm informed.

P1: I think I'm informed too. Now my young fella wouldn't tell me too much myself so I find it beneficial for me to go to the Parents', to get involved, because otherwise I know nothing. Then he's involved with sports so I hear it from the other lads on the side line so I have my ear there the whole time. It would really depend because my child would tell you nothing. Other kids will come home and might say more. Do you remember the time they had the dinosaur exhibition here? Sure I knew nothing about it. [My child] never opened his mouth so I never knew, I'd hear nothing unless I

P2: There was a note home about that so he didn't give that to you either

P1: There, you go

What information might schools need from parents?
P1: What's going on really

P2: Feedback

P1: Personal issues, you know, they really need to be informed

How might communication between home and school be improved?
P1: Home and school

P2: Well you see I find it ok here. This place is very open

P1: It is not the same everywhere

P2: It's very relaxed sort of, you can just wander in and ask anything you want to ask or

What about other schools?

P1:They should all have an open door policy. You should just be able to walk in and ask

I know, yes

P1: If you have an issue, you should be able to be seen by somebody, a teacher definitely, you should be seen that day. Because if you have an issue with your child, if your child comes home upset and you get on to make an appointment, some body should

be back to you and you should be able to be there with your husband or whoever and sort out that issue that day because to a child 24 hours of an issue – that is a lot of time–

P2: Can be.

P1: You know they are at a sensitive age. You might think that they are as tough as cookies but they're not.

P2: They're not

P1: So definitely there should be, especially with kids

What about their progress – how they are getting on?

P2: They give you a report first, they give you the official report on how they are doing and then you would have your feedback from your parent-teacher meeting after Christmas.

P1: Once a year, yeah

P2: In the report the teacher will sort of let you know that they know your child and that he is good at this but God help him but he is not great at that and that helps you

P1: I'd imagine if they are getting extra help. I'd imagine that you'd be called in. That should be monitored.

P2: You know the extra support that some of the children get

Learning support

P2: There should be extra reports more often if there are issues.

P1: They should be talking to them regularly – once a term at least

P2: Yeah, absolutely

6. Involvement:

How can parents become involved in their children's education?

P2: Join the Parents' Association. *Laughter*

P2: That's the obvious one – like if you want to know go and join – if you can - if you can, you know

What encourages parents to become involved?

P1: To know what's going on I suppose

P2: And well, the nice, if the principal is there, that he's welcoming and he's nice and he's approachable and that you can talk, you know. There is nothing worse than going to a meeting and you are afraid to talk up, or you can't open your mouth, or you are made to feel that what you are saying is not valid or…. [The principal] would never do that, no matter how stupid or whatever

P1: He's very easy going. He'd always make you feel like there was no problem with whatever you said

I Know, Yeah.

What discourages or prevents them from becoming involved?

P2: I suppose if they don't know anybody, they just don't want to feel 'O God, I don't know. That crowd there and there's a few of them there and they are always talking '

P1: You hear a lot of that

P2; You hear a lot of that. People say 'Oh I went up and it was a real clique so I didn't go anymore' and, well, and sometimes that can happen and that's upsetting but more often than not that's a perception you yourself have, you've misjudged really

What else might discourage them from getting involved?

P2: They wouldn't have the time, in this day and age.

P1: They might have younger kids to be minded

P2: If you're coming in after work, you're going to get the dinner, get the homework done, put the kids to bed, it is a lot to be running out the door again

Yeah

P1: You're probably involved with so many other things anyway

P2: Exactly – you can only commit to one or two things– so if you're involved with the Church on a grand scale or you might be involved with the Girls' school or

P1: You are not going to get involved with everything

Interruption by secretary to say she was going home

7. Decision-making and governance

What say do you think parents should have in running the school?
Phone rings – son calling his mother
P2: On the major issues, it is very limited in terms of which teacher a class will get, the structure the school year should take - those kinds of issues, we wouldn't really have any say but the smaller issues, say underneath those, you would get to influence input –

What about?

P2: if you were right. Then again, you could come up with some thing and be way off. *laughter*

What about the school rules – how much of a say do parents have?
P1: Well, have we gone through them?

P2: Yeah, when you come to your first meeting you are told what the school rules are. There are not many in this school.

P1: No

What if there is a school rule that parents didn't like?

P1: We would bring it up at the Parents Association and we would talk about it

P2: We would talk, wouldn't we

Yeah

P2: It would be open to discussion like it applied to say - the healthy eating policy – that's the result of a discussion that you brought up at the Parents Council.

P1: Yeah, yeah,

P2: There wasn't a healthy eating policy in the school but there is now. The school doesn't force children to have something. It doesn't lay it down in law but they're encouraged to bring something in for break, isn't it?

P1: Yeah, fruit, yoghurt or something for little break

What about if it was something that was being taught to the children?

P1: Sure that's all come down

P2: No, sure we'd have no say

P1: We'd have no say in that

P2: I wouldn't expect it to be honest with you

P1: Like if it has come through the Department we'd just take it as

P2: Then I mean, the teacher, there is a bit of luck in that, in the sense that if the child gets a teacher who is very fond of Irish,

P1: Irish,

P2: Irish or whatever, you will find that your child will probably be doing a lot more of that, you know. A teacher who is big in to nature, walking, wild life, music

P1: ---- is a great teacher at Art and she's really arty and she's wonderful and they're doing a lot of art and that's great

P2: Like that happens in every school I'm sure

If the school sent home a policy and you disagreed with it what would you do?
P1: Well I'd probably write in something. I'd probably say it in the yard.

P2: Like we'd discuss it at a meeting

P1: We'd trash it out and see where they were coming from – like what was the idea behind it, tell them if you thought it was stupid or whatever *laughter*

8. Changes

What changes have you noticed in schools and education over the last few years?
P1: I'd say it has gone more lax, this new - I don't know – what this new policy, this new teaching.

Yeah

P1: I like to see the books to see what -- I like to see books, what's supposed to be there

P2: It doesn't seem to be as structured, the new system

P1: I'm afraid that it mightn't be as good as, you know, as a few years ago, when [son] went through the primary school

P2: We're too young though to know yet, in the sense that we haven't see the

P1: We don't know yet really. We are just hoping to God that it's ok, it's right and that is good

P2: Like my attitude is that once my children are happy and they're doing their bit and that's ok

P1: The one thing I noticed with for example Maths - this way they have of doing subtraction. Did you notice that?

P2: Yeah,

P1: It is the real American thing, apparently it is the American way of doing it and I am saying what was wrong with the way we did it for the crack. They are there and they are crossing off up here and they are changing then down to whatever

P2: I know

P1: and [her son] would say 'Is that right?' and I would write it down my way and do it and say it's correct. I think it is the most

P2: I think there are few things like that

P1: The bane of my life. Which is actually more correct?

P2: If you were to sit down and think about it – Are you a teacher? It has to do with the tens and the units so that they actually understand what they're doing. The value at the top is a ten or unit and they actually understand it whereas we didn't because we just learnt it

P1: We borrowed and we always paid back

They borrow from the top line where as we borrowed from the bottom line. It wasn't correct.

P1: Oh I tell you

It worked *(Chorus)*

P2: Like there are a lot of people confused over these simple things

P1: They do these things through trial and error

P2: It is a more correct way

Tell the story of my twins

P2: The end result is the same

P1: Do you think they have a greater understanding in terms of their number on the whole rather than the little number that they are using the tens or units?

P2: It does give them greater understanding of number.

Teachers have this argument up and down the country

Really! *(Chorus) (Laughter)*

One group would be giving your view and another would be giving your view. You'd go in to a staff and there would be old teachers and young teachers and you'd think that it would be the old teachers who want to do it the old way and the young teachers who'd want to do it the new way but

P2: I always thought it was strange - you borrowed something and you paid it back, whereas now they go out borrow everything and pay back nothing *laughter*

P1: You're borrowing but you are not paying back

P2: The whole thing about *pause* tests on a Friday. That sometimes doesn't work anymore. I noticed some times that they start off in September, October, every Friday there would a test – Irish and English- and everybody would be that would kind of go as well and by June, bejapers, if they are in on a Friday.

P1: The tests on Friday were great for keeping them up to speed with the spellings.

P2: It's good for kids like - routine is fantastic for kids. They thrive on routine

They do a whole lot now because they know they are going to have a test to-morrow, whereas if that starts falling off. They don't put the same emphasis on learning anymore because they know there won't be a test, whereas if you have a teacher, an old fashioned teacher as I call them, they will still regard it that if you are not in on the Thursday they will give twenty spellings on the Wednesday because they know they are not going to be in. I think that is great for kids to know that, we'll get double now because we are off to-morrow, but that very seldom happens now

P1: You'd go through the old spelling check book and you'd say, 'There's no way'

P2: It's completely different anyway all over the….. Are you a secondary school teacher? *No*, Primary school then. They do essays full of text. I looked at one of [daughter's] copies yesterday and it was full of text language. I said if she kept up like that

Yeah

P2: Oh, I don't know, you don't want to be old fashioned and get locked in

Well they can't use text for the Junior Cert

P2: But when they start speaking words with no vowels in it, like, you are in big trouble then

P1: Sign of the times

Story about teacher correcting copies – I have to remember not to use text

P2: Yes, yes, using it all summer, it would be easy to forget. There is no emphasis on grammar. There are signs, road sign and signs in shop windows that are completely wrong. There a sign on this side of the ----- road 'Please be careful of our children. Drive slow'

P1: Oh! Right

P2: Every time I look at it I'd say 'O Jesus, who put that up? Who wrote that?' I say to other people, 'Did you see that sign? It's terriebl' and they say, 'What is wrong with the sign?'

Laughter

What about attendance, behaviour, has that changed over the years?

P2: The attendance

P1: They are a little bit more strict now than they were

P2: You can't take them out for holidays. That's totally discouraged. Okay, if you are missing one or two days, then ok but you are not allowed to pull them, whip them out whenever you want just because you can get a cheap package

Cleaner asks can she clean the room

P1: It is only right that it is twenty days because if you think of that – someone is out for three weeks and then they are back in and then a month later they're off and the teacher is holding up they are trying to catch up what they have missed because she has been out sunning herself in

What about behaviour?

P2: Oh well, the parents should know about the behaviour anyway

Has it changed anything within schools?

P2: It's good

P1: Well now, absolutely. There are huge demands being made on teachers now to be up-to-date as regards any health issues. ADHD is a huge thing, whereas years ago children were bold but now-a-days everybody seems to have ADHD and they have special problems and I am sure that there is a huge book that every teacher has to read about an ADHD child

P2: I think it's monumental the demands that are being made on teachers.

P1: You have to spot things – like if they didn't spot something

P2: Every second child is asthmatic,

P1: then you have the bullying. That's just - like I am sure that there are twenty books written about that

P1: Hundreds

Yeah, hundreds

P2: All you have to do, all you have to know, the courses you have to do they make the and the procedure for

P1: Did you see that case there where the student hit the teacher and because it wasn't documented properly, he was allowed back in to the school. So with all that it's a bit - watching

P2: Oh, I think, I think a teacher has to be just so aware of all social issues now and then like sure every second child at the back of your class probably won't speak English if you've got junior or senior infants, so you have that to contend with as well.

9. If you had one piece of advice to give to a new parent with a child starting school, what would it be?

Join the Parents Association (*Chorus, laughter)*

P1: And you will know everything that is going on

P2: Absolutely

P1: If you can, you couldn't force any body but I'd definitely say to somebody, if you can or even make sure that you come in and read the notes on the notice board.

P2: It will take 10, 20 seconds just to go down to it and see what's going on

What if you can't become involved?

P1: Keep an eye on your child, a close eye on your child. At the end of the day, we know the kids best and the minute something happen, you know there is something up here

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