

Infant Teachers' Perceptions of Parental involvement in DEIS schools

By

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requirements of the Masters in Early Childhood Education**

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DECLARATION

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

Signed: *Katie McDermott* Date: 2/06/2020

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ABSTRACT

In the ever-changing field of education, there is an awareness of the positive benefits of parental involvement on student achievement especially in the early years of school (Epstein, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et.al. 2005; O'Toole et.al. 2019). A good parent teacher partnership is especially important for children in DEIS schools. This cannot be left to chance as it is accepted that education has the power to break a cycle of disadvantage and a good partnership approach to working with parents will help these children reach their full educational potential (DES, 2005; INTO, 2004; Weir et.al. 2017).

There is a gap in the research about the 'lived' experiences of teachers concerning their perspectives and support of parental involvement. As a crucial figure in the child's microsystem, teachers can impact on the success of parent-teacher relationships. However, in the absence of formal training in this area they may rely significantly on their own personal perceptions and experiences when planning for parental involvement (Epstein, 2013; Hoover-Dempsey et.al. 2002). The purpose of this study is to explore infant teachers' perceptions and experiences of parental involvement in six DEIS schools. The study is supported by current literature, curriculum frameworks and national policies which have committed to ensuring parents are partners in their child's education (DES, 2005, 2006; NCCA, 2009). A phenomenological research design approach was taken along with a qualitative method to gather the data. The study identified a range of complexities involved in successfully implementing parental involvement in these schools. The main themes that emerged from the data were differing teacher opinions and beliefs on how parents should be involved in their child's education. The study revealed that teachers play an important role in nurturing open and positive communication to establish relationships with parents. Findings also highlighted teachers' partnership with HSCL and school management in promoting parental involvement. A lack of effective formal training in preparing educators for family, school and community partnerships was also identified. Understanding how teachers' perceptions influence parental involvement can create awareness and could result in a more proactive and positive approach to this area from schools, principals, initial teacher education and continuous professional development.

LIST OF USED ABBREVIATIONS

AISTEAR	Early Childhood Curriculum Framework
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Science
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ESRI	The Economic and Social Research Institute
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
MIE	Marino Institute of Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCP-P	National Parent's Council Primary
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SIOLTA	National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education
UNCRC	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

The concept of parent involvement is not a new phenomenon. The nature of involvement has evolved over the years, and in the 21st century, active parents are considered to be a vital component of children's learning and development by researchers, policy makers, administrators and educators (Epstein, 2009; Stewart, 2008).

Parent involvement and its positive effects on education has become an increasingly important topic in education and educational research. Castelli and Pepe's (2008) found that for every article written about parental involvement in 1966, thirty-five were written in 2007.

Epstein et al. (2002) states that involvement should go beyond the home and school by cohesively bringing together homes, schools and communities. This resonates with the old proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' and is also in line with Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological approach to parental involvement. Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta (2000) suggest that children's home and school are the most fundamental environments that influence their learning habits, therefore strict separations between the home and school life of the child are unnatural.

In line with established research and changes to national legislation and policies, many schools globally have worked on increasing parental involvement during the 21st century. Existing research on parental involvement largely indicates a positive relationship with student academic outcomes. Students generally score higher on academic achievement tests, have better attendance at school, and are more likely to continue their post-primary education when parents are actively involved in students' academic lives (Jeynes, 2005; Martinez, 2004; Reynolds & Clements, 2005). The research also shows there are holistic benefits to be gained for pupils, parents, teachers and

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society more broadly from positive parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in schools (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 1997; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995).

Researchers recognise and acknowledge that parental involvement is most beneficial during the pre-school and primary school years. According to Shonkhoff and Phillips (2000), the earlier parental involvement begins in a child's education, the more powerful the benefits are. Young children construct their student identity in the early years of school, and how well they perform in these years may shape their later academic experiences (Hadley & Rouse, 2018).

For a teacher to work effectively with young children, they must understand and appreciate their home settings. To do this a teacher must be able to build a positive working relationship with the parents of the child. Part of this equation includes a teachers' understanding of family cultures, values and beliefs around education and how this may affect parenting within that family. Rogoff (2003) argues that "parents do not face child-rearing issues on their own...each generation of parents relies on cultural practices that have developed historically to meet prior circumstances" (p. 110). So, parents' views and opinions about children's upbringing, including education were predisposed by the rules and norms of their local society (Rogoff, 2003). Therefore, it is essential that teachers work at developing reciprocal and positive communication with parents at the earliest stage of a child's education.

Much of the research has sought to explain differences in levels of parental involvement by trying to establish demographic trends. Less research has focused on influences such as teacher views and practices and there is an absence of studies that acknowledge the central role of teachers in parent-teacher relations. Much of the existing research has been concerned with the involvement of parents in the education of their own children, particularly in numeracy and literacy

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(DES, 2011a; Margrain 2010; Warren & Young 2002). The ecological approach of Epstein (1987) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) would argue that to examine parental involvement by looking at parents in isolation would be inappropriate. Hill and Taylor (2004) note that one of the challenges in parental involvement research is “the integrating of various perspectives” and the question over who should be consulted when studying parental involvement (p.163). They argue that multiple perspectives, such as parents, teachers, principals and children themselves, are unique and important for a full understanding of parent involvement (Hill & Taylor, 2004). As already stated very few studies have consulted with teachers on this topic and until we know teachers’ perceptions of the value of parent involvement, the picture remains unclear. This research will explore infant teachers’ perceptions of this topic in relation to infant classrooms.

A lot of existing research regarding parental involvement is generally focused on parents from a middle-class context. In contrast this research focuses on teachers working in schools in areas designated as disadvantaged by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and are therefore categorised as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Band 1 schools. These schools consistently experience educational inequality in terms of student participation and school-related outcomes (DES, 2011b). Despite the common view held in educational settings that parents from lower socio-economic groups do not value education or have high educational expectations for their children, recent research by Williams et al. (2009) and Byrne and Smyth (2010) would indicate that high aspirations are apparent among all parents. It is also widely recognised that levels of parental involvement in areas of designated disadvantage does not happen in the ways either teachers or parents would like (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Sanders & Epstein, 2000). Therefore, this study will seek to gain further insights and understandings into parent-

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teacher relations by examining teachers' perceptions of parental involvement through the official voice and lived realities of teachers.

1.2 Rationale

The focus on parental involvement and its significance in the early years of primary school is based on the researcher's work experience and academic interests. The researcher's interest in the area emerged from her experience of working with children in DEIS schools and consequent experiences of living and teaching in Chicago, IL. Further study of theoretical and research literature on parental involvement has led the researcher to believe in the critical importance of this topic from an equality perspective.

The importance of parental involvement in ensuring positive education outcomes for children is firmly established and acknowledged at policy level in Ireland. Parent-teacher relationships are central to its effective implementation in day to day life. Therefore, in order to better understand how methods purveyed in curricula and policy documents are translated into practice, it is important to explore the perceptions and personal experiences of teachers regarding parental involvement in infant classroom settings. This research attempts to explore the complexities of some issues that arise in low-socio economic communities as expressed through the personal experiences of teachers themselves. An understanding of how professional expectations are negotiated by the personal beliefs and experiences of teachers will identify perceived weaknesses and potential solutions.

Teacher's perspectives on parental involvement are important to understand how they relate their own identities to low socio-economic communities (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006).

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These studies can create a research base to inform school management, policymakers and initial teacher training.

The author spent her teaching career in Ireland working in a DEIS band 1 school in urban Dublin and recently took a two-year career break and re-located to Chicago working as a Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teacher. In contrast to practice in Ireland parents and grandparents were invited into the classroom numerous times during the school year, parents were kept informed of their child's learning through a class Instagram, and a personal phone call once a term. Two parent teacher meetings took place during the school year

Having returned to Ireland, the researcher felt inspired to interrogate and understand what parental involvement means and looks like to teachers in DEIS schools in Ireland. The researcher is curious to investigate the experiences of teachers and how they try to put this partnership into practice. The researcher believes that the perspectives and opinions of teachers must be explored with a view to ensuring parental involvement becomes central to the learning experience of our children.

1.3 Method

A qualitative approach is identified as the most appropriate based on the research objective and questions. A phenomenological method is applied to the study to yield rich data from ten infant teachers in six DEIS schools in Dublin. This would enable in depth interrogation of teachers' perspectives on various issues related to the research questions. Telephone interviews are chosen as the method for data collection. Semi-structured telephone interviews with teachers ensure that participants' views are heard on several relevant themes identified in advance and to also allow for topics that were not considered by the researcher to emerge during the interviews.

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Ethical aspects applicable to the study were considered and addressed in accordance with the Research Ethics Committee in Marino Institute of Education. Necessary steps have been taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants. These issues are addressed in further detail in Chapter 3.

1.4 Dissertation outline

This dissertation includes five chapters. The first chapter introduces the context, rationale, short description of research methods and thesis outline.

Relevant theoretical, policy and research literature are reviewed in the second chapter and organised into related themes.

Chapter three discusses in detail the research methodology and the actions taken during the planning and implementation process of the research.

Chapter four presents key findings identified from the data and discusses them within the context of existing literature.

Chapter five summarises the main findings and presents recommendations and issues requiring further studies in this area. It concludes with a summary of the research.

The past two decades have brought an increasing focus on the role of parents in Irish education. Changing societal structures also mean that parental involvement will likely become a much more important element in Irish education in the near future, making this a particularly appropriate time for examining teacher perceptions of parental involvement in Irish education. The research will now continue by critically examining the relevant literature pertaining to parental involvement.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature of parental involvement, clarifying the relevant concepts and identifying what previous research has revealed, thereby allowing the refinement of the research questions for the present study. It is prefaced by a brief introductory discussion of the definition and concepts of parental involvement, as these are important for anchoring understanding and detailing the theoretical framework that underpins the research. The chapter comprises of seven main sections. These discuss the history of parental involvement in an Irish context and in the context of educational disadvantage, teacher perceptions of parental involvement, school ethos and barriers to parental involvement. It concludes with examining the early years of primary school and building relationships during this crucial time of a child's life.

2.2 Defining Parental Involvement

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) broadly define parental involvement as “the dedication of resources by the parent to the child within a given domain” (p.238). Hill et al. (2004, p.1491) were more specific with their definition “Parent involvement is largely defined as parents’ work with schools and with their children to benefit their children’s educational outcomes and future success”.

The literature consistently shows that parental involvement takes many forms. This includes:

- Good parenting in the home by providing a secure and stable environment,

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- Parents' modelling of positive social and educational values
- Intellectual stimulation
- Parent-child and parent school communication
- Ensuring that a child attends school and completes their homework
- General participation in the work of the school through participation in Parents Association and Boards of Management

(Benner, Boyle & Sadler, 2016; Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012).

Some literature classifies parental involvement in two categories: formal parental involvement (school-based) and informal parental involvement (home-based) (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Robinson & Harris, 2014). Informal parental involvement generally happens in the home or community and is defined as 'academic-related activities and educational support that happen at home or outside of the school environment' (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012). This may include visiting libraries, museums, reading to a child, helping with homework, arriving to school on time and ensuring attendance, providing emotional support and discussing the importance of education and school (Auerbach, 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Stewart, 2008).

In contrast formal parental involvement includes the behaviors, activities, and support that take place in schools. This could include attending parent-teacher meetings, volunteering in the classroom or on school trips, communicating with teachers about student's academic progress and participating in fundraisers or school events (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Interestingly, while the formal involvement of parents is more 'visible', "It is what parents do to support learning in the

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school and in the home that makes the difference to achievement” (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 278/279).

The most heavily cited and generally accepted contemporary frameworks for viewing parental involvement were inspired by the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) (See figure 2.1). Bronfenbrenner believed that education is not centered in the home or the school, ‘but that they are like two focal points in an ellipse, and are all centered in a community’ (O’Toole, 2016).

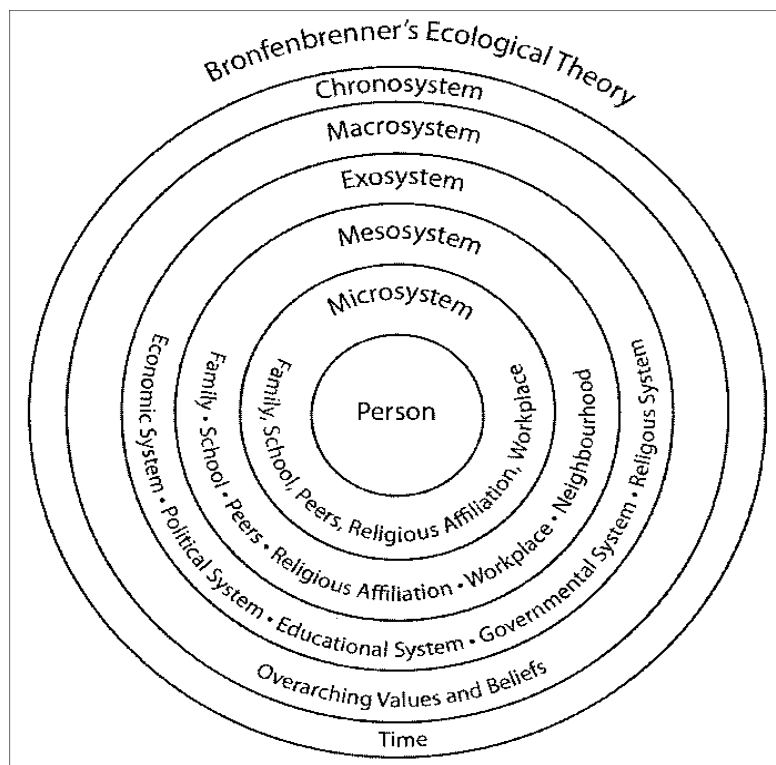


Figure 2.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

Influenced by Bronfenbrenner and viewed from a social and organisational perspective Epstein's early theory of overlapping spheres focused on three major contexts in which children develop and learn: the family, the school and the community (Epstein, 1995) (See figure 2.2).

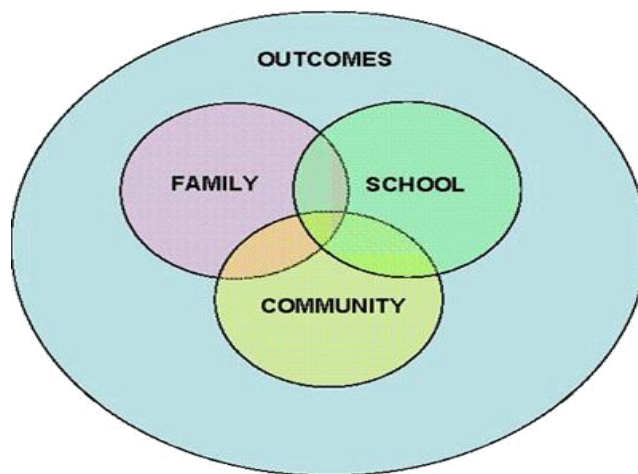


Figure 2.2. Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model

Epstein's (1987) Model identifies there are some practices that school, family and community undertake separately and some that they undertake cooperatively in order to influence the development and learning of the child. Epstein believed there must be 'successful partnerships formed between these spheres in order to meet the needs of the child' (1995). Epstein further developed this theory by identifying six types of parental involvement (See Appendix D). These are: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision-making, and Collaborating with communities (Epstein, 2009). However, Kohl, Lengua and McMahon (2000) argue Epstein's model places the responsibility on school-initiated behaviours rather than parent-initiated behaviours.

A more holistic understanding of 'education' has led to a move away from the term parental 'involvement' and 'engagement'. Epstein's most recent work favours 'school, family and community partnership' as it recognises the 'roots' of children's learning and emphasises a shared responsibility (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; O'Toole et.al, 2019). Some researchers are wary of the term 'partnership' as they believe that to use the word 'partnership' without making practical changes may lead to hostility for all involved because of a lack of trust and respect (Hornby &

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Lafaele, 2011). Dockett et al. (2012) revealed a lack of ‘partnership’ may be particularly evident in disadvantaged or culturally diverse communities where parents’ expertise in relation to their children’s education is not always valued and parents are not always viewed as partners.

Giles (2006) provided a simplified three type version of Epstein’s model: Involvement (attending parent nights, etc.), Engagement (volunteering in classrooms-higher involvement), and Empowerment (committees, decision-making, governance) and the over-arching category of parent ownership. Smit, Driessen, Sluiter and Slegers (2007) used the terms Participation (in school) and Involvement (at home) to distinguish between school-based and home-based activities. They distinguished between ‘Spontaneous’ (bottom-up, generally non-institutional) and ‘Planned’ (top-down, institutional) parental involvement/participation (Smit et al., 2007), as did Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) in their comprehensive review of the literature on parental involvement.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s Model of Parental Involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995) offers a noteworthy compliment to Epstein’s model. Along with explaining that parents can be involved in their child’s education through home and school it also attempts to describe how this type of involvement could positively influence student outcomes. This model highlights four methods of influence, modelling, reinforcing, direct instruction and encouragement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). This model proposes family engagement is a process that starts with families’ decision-making about being involved and that the “cognitive element of involvement in decision-making includes role construction for involvement and self-efficacy (‘I can do this work’) for helping children succeed in school” (Whitaker, 2018, p. 423).

These models indicate the wide-ranging opinions on the nature of parental involvement. There appears to be a lack of consistency in differentiating between terms such as ‘involvement’, ‘engagement’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’. This has led some researchers, such as Epstein,

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to replace them and therefore the research must be interpreted with caution. However, despite the discrepancies Epstein and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's theoretical frameworks have brought significant structure to the topic of parental involvement.

While Epstein's model has endured extensive examination from the research community (Jordan, Orozco & Averett, 2001) and the logic of Epstein's changing of her definition is valued, the term 'parental involvement' shall be used in this study. This term allows us to consider activities involving parents that may not fit under the heading of 'partnership' but are still relevant when looking at the broad influences on parent-teacher relations in Irish DEIS schools. Additionally, the term 'parental involvement' appears to be the term most frequently used in Ireland to refer to the parental behaviours that are the focus of this study.

2.3 History of Parental Involvement: An Irish perspective

The subject of parental involvement in Irish children's education is complex. The National School System was established in 1831 and Catholic and Protestant clergymen were given complete control over schools. Parents' voices were 'marginalised and rendered silent' (Coolahan, 1981). This continued despite the recognition in the Irish Constitution 1937 of family as the "primary and natural educator of the child" (Article 42). The Constitution also gave parents the right to choose a particular type of education for their children. However, Byrne and Smyth (2010a) noted that the Church and State gave little time to including parents in policy-making, consultation and administration of schools.

The early 1970's saw the challenge to power structures in societies around the world resulting in governments seeking to increase citizen participation and democracy in decision-making (Beattie, 1985 as cited in Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010). This led Irish people to expect and

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demand an opportunity to participate in decision-making and to challenge the traditional power bases (Cluskey, 1996 as cited in Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010). In turn education became increasingly politicised and parents' concerns were looked at as motives for political support (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010).

In 1969 a booklet titled 'All Our Children', which outlined changes planned for Irish education was issued to parents (O'Sullivan, 2005). The new curriculum in 1971 was welcomed due to its child-centered appeal however this curriculum handbook for teachers did not mention the role of parents in their child's education.

Prior to 1975, management of primary schools was assigned solely to a manager who was usually a priest or rector. The introduction of School Boards of Management in 1975 gave parents and teachers a direct role in school management. This was reinforced in 1985 with the formation of the National Parents Council-Primary (NPC-P). Through the NPC-P parents have a central role at local and national level through representation on Department of Education and Science policy development committees. The formation of the NPC's was one of the most significant developments in acknowledging the legitimate role of Irish parents in the educational process (OECD, 1997, p.146).

Progress for parents continued in the 1990s. Recommendations in the Report of the Primary Education Review Body (1990) went so far as to propose a support role for parents in the classroom in addition to having influence at national policy formation and implementation locally (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010).

Circular 24/91 titled 'Parents as Partners in Education' and issued to all primary schools encouraged principals to increase parental involvement (DES, 1991). The government was now

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making it an aim to include parents and stated that it was an “essential strategy of educational policy and practice” (DES, p.1). A partnership approach was also projected in ‘The Education Act’ (1998) which refers to parents as partners who are ‘responsible for the creation, together with the board....and the teachers of a school environment which is supportive of learning’ (Government of Ireland, 1998, Section 23). This Act gives parents authority within the legal areas of education such as the right to receive copies of reports on the operation and performance of the school, the right to access school accounts and to be involved in the process and preparation of the school plan.

The implementation of the new 1999 Primary School Curriculum saw ‘partnership in education’ as one of fourteen ‘key issues’ (National Council for Curriculum & Assessment (NCCA), 1999, p. 9). Recognition by the NCCA of the necessity to integrate children with special educational needs into mainstream classrooms required teachers and parents to plan for a child’s specific needs in a new type of communication partnership.

More recent policy development and frameworks encouraging parental involvement include Aistear- The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework year 2009 and Síolta- The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006). Current updates to the 1999 Primary School Curriculum include ‘The Primary Language Curriculum’ (NCCA/DES, 2016) as a literacy framework to be “implemented in tandem with parental support to increase their engagement with the school and their child’s education” (Childhood Development Initiative, 2018, p.5).

2.4 Educational disadvantage and parental involvement

In the 1960s, due to urbanization, industrialization and inequality in education, the education sector began to pay attention to a cohort of pupils that were loosely termed

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‘disadvantaged’. The 1998 Education Act, defines disadvantage as “the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education” (Section 32 (9)). The impacts of poverty and disadvantage on children are known to cause difficulties in the areas of the physical, social, emotional and educational well-being of the child (Weir, Kavanagh, Kelleher & Moran, 2017). Education and schooling have been considered vital for children to help them to escape poverty and disadvantage (INTO, 2004).

Long-standing research about the role of the home linked parental involvement to children’s academic success and Bronfenbrenner (1976) noted that “the involvement of the child’s family as an active participant is critical to the success of the intervention programme” (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, p. 252). The Department of Education was influenced by an early intervention programme in the United States called ‘Head Start’. This resulted in the development of a number of school-based intervention schemes. The Rutland Street Project in 1969, aimed to reduce the impact of educational disadvantage in a deprived inner-city area of Dublin by preparing children for primary school (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010). This initiative was the first in Ireland “to include parental involvement as a specific component of an overall strategy to deal with educational disadvantage” (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010, p.83). By the early 1990s the term ‘educational disadvantage’ was becoming common in educational discourse (Smyth & Hannan, 2000) and consequently the preschool and primary school sector benefited from numerous policies and initiatives. These include the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCLS) (1990) The ‘Early Start’ preschool programme (1994) (intervention for 3-4-year olds who are most at risk of social disadvantage); ‘Breaking the Cycle’ (1996) which in 2001 was incorporated into ‘Giving Children an Even Break’ (Weir et al. 2017). In 2002, the School Completion Programme was introduced which was designed to combat early school leaving (Government of Ireland, 2006) and

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this was quickly followed by the introduction of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme in 2005 (DES, 2005). This scheme was focused on addressing and meeting the educational needs of children age 3 to 18 in disadvantaged communities (DES, 2005). From a parental involvement perspective, this scheme promised a “renewed emphasis on the involvement of parents and families in children’s education” (DES, 2005, p. 40).

All schools involved in the DEIS scheme have access to a HSCL coordinator. The HSCL scheme which is based on a Freirian approach to education and community development allowed DEIS schools to promote partnership between parents, schools and teachers (Mulkerrins, 2007). The approach includes a variety of activities including home visits, the development of drop-in centres and parents’ rooms in schools, the provision of crèche facilities so that parents can attend scheme activities, and a range of courses and classes (DES, 2006). The role of the HSCL coordinator is to “Develop the pupil-parent-teacher relationship, so that school becomes a place where all young people can reach their potential” (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019, p.10). Reports show the HSCL scheme has been effective particularly in terms of parental attitudes and pupil behavior (ESRI, 2015; INTO, 2009; O’Toole, 2016).

When examining parental involvement in an educationally disadvantaged setting it is somewhat different to examining it in a middle-class context. Although much of the literature tries to purvey an ‘undifferentiated parental voice’, the reality is that there are two distinct strands of parental involvement in schools (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). One strand is directed at working-class parents. Its foundations could be seen as originating from a cultural deficit model of explaining educational failure and it seeks to involve parents who may be perceived as being on the periphery. This is backed by extensive research which indicates that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to underperform in the education system than their peers from higher

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income backgrounds (Kelleghan et al. 1995; Smyth, 1999). This disadvantage has been described as arising due to a gap between the capabilities and dispositions which a child brings to school and those which are valued in schools and required for learning (Bourdieu, 1997; Kellaghan, 2001). These capabilities and dispositions are thought to be influenced by the economic, social and cultural ‘capital’ that is available to him/her within the home environment (Bourdieu, 1997). However, a notable change in the debate on educational disadvantage has been the shift of focus from the social and cultural background of the individual to the process of schooling itself and the role of parents generally within that process (Frawley, 2014).

The literature acknowledges that socio-economic status (SES) can have a huge impact on parents’ capacity to contribute meaningfully to their child’s education. Although there are barriers and potential difficulties for parents of lower SES in contributing to their children’s education it is important to remember that “parents, regardless of their socio-economic status can influence their child’s academic attainment” (Hartas, 2008, p.139).

2.5 Teacher perceptions of parental involvement

When one thinks about the people who have an influence on a students’ learning and education, we primarily focus on two groups: teachers and parents. Both groups have something in common in that they try to promote academic success through interactions with children. However, the paths to reach success may differ between the groups (Hill et al., 2004). Research shows a “teacher’s practice toward involving families is often-times more important than such variables as family background, race, ethnicity, social-class, marital status, parent education, or work status” (Garcia, 2004, p.291) in determining the level of involvement shown by parents (Epstein, 2001; Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

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Perception is defined in the Oxford dictionary as “an idea, a belief or an image you have as a result of how you see or understand something” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, 2020). Perception is integral to understanding human behaviour as every person perceives the world differently and approaches difficulties they may encounter based on their individual perspective. Accordingly, teachers’ perceptions of parents and their involvement in schools will differ due to their subjective views which are influenced by culture, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

Before a teacher has even attended his/her initial teacher training, they have grown up in an environment which has shaped their personal beliefs and behaviour. Personal beliefs influence an individual’s perception and understanding of an event and the wider environment. Perception positions an individual’s outlook toward particular tasks and they influence decisions related to goal-setting and goal attainment. In addition, perception influences the personal development of commitment and skills related to goals and activities (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). Therefore, much like parents, teachers often have their beliefs about parent involvement shaped by their ‘lived’ experiences. The first place teachers could be encouraged to challenge their beliefs and reflect on the topic of parental involvement is during their initial teacher training. However, despite extensive theoretical and empirical work supporting the critical role of parents in students’ school success, pre-service teachers generally receive little preparation for involving parents (Epstein, 2013; Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde & Mutton, 2018). Epstein and Sanders (2006) found that “despite some progress having been made within initial teacher education courses it was still the case that few pre-service teachers had access to full courses on family-school partnerships” (Willemse et al., 2018, p.252). Therefore, without covering this important area in initial teacher training new teachers may automatically begin to view parental involvement in a particular way.

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It is also important to note that the role of the teacher has changed dramatically in recent years. In Ireland there has been a significant shift away from the status of the school 'master' as a highly respected member of the local community that commanded authority (O'Toole et.al. 2019). The teacher as a professional does not appear to be as highly valued as it once was. More recent changes in society have resulted in an expectation of teachers taking on multiple roles including teacher, psychologist and counsellor.

With schools and parents focusing more and more on ways to involve parents' teachers have a huge role to play and are essentially the driving force behind parental involvement being successful or unsuccessful. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) indicate most teachers are genuine in their desire to engage meaningfully with parents and are very supportive of parental involvement and while the intent is there for some teachers it can be a challenge. In a study by Jacobson new teachers revealed that communicating and involving parents is typically the greatest challenge they face (Jacobson, 2005).

While many teachers have a desire to find ways to involve parents, they may be unsure how best to engage parents in a reciprocal, positive relationship. They may feel unprepared or unsupported which could lead to many teachers falling into the trap of complacently using the historical, teacher-dominant paradigm where the teacher is in control of decisions being made instead of fostering an equal partnership with parents (Comer & Haynes, 1991). In DEIS schools this could be detrimental to parental involvement as a power-imbalance may cause parents to disengage from the school. Mulkerrins (2007) noted teachers can develop deficit models that depict certain working-class parents as lacking involvement and seeming uninterested. Robinson and Harris (2014) identified teachers often view poor families as under-valuing education and not having an interest in their child's education. Sadly, while researchers and theorists have moved

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towards seeing children's education as a shared responsibility of both parents and schools, Moore and Lasky (2001) argue that 'deficit' approaches to parental involvement predominantly remain (p.3). Teacher knowledge can contribute to overcoming some of these issues as teachers who know how to effectively involve parents and who are convinced of the benefits of doing so are more likely to put their knowledge into practice (Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

Garcia (2004) found that teacher efficacy was positively associated with parental involvement practices. The construct of self-efficacy is grounded in social-cognitive theory and was formulated by Bandura in 1977 (Bandura, 1997). Essentially, a person's perceived self-efficacy has a major role to play in the "amount of effort a person devotes to the accomplishment of a specific outcome because it is related to a person's inherent beliefs of his or her capabilities to accomplish something, regardless of actual competencies" (Garcia, 2004, p.295). The literature shows that a personal sense of teaching efficacy is related to stronger confidence in one's efforts, greater goal setting, and greater persistence in overcoming obstacles (Bandura, 1997; Garcia, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992). Therefore, if a teacher has a strong sense of teaching efficacy and is passionate about parental involvement, they may be determined to make it happen (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed, 2002). A study by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2002) found that:

Stronger personal beliefs in one's teaching efficacy, especially if combined with commitment to the importance of parental involvement, are likely to support new or renewed invitations to parents, persistence in efforts to involve parents, persistence in overcoming the obstacles encountered, and the possibility of increasingly productive parent-child-teacher relationships (p.860).

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However, this may operate in another way also in that teachers must believe in parent' self-efficacy for helping their children to learn. Teachers who believe that parents are capable of contributing to their children's educational success are more likely to act in ways that will ensure parents' involvement than those holding less positive views (Garcia, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1992).

2.6 School Ethos

The school ethos and whole-school approach can also impact teacher perceptions on parent involvement and teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The role that principals, administrators, staff members and community leaders play in this area is very important and it is critical that they provide leadership, support, and feedback to teachers as they try to build home-school relations (Garcia, 2004). If a school does not support or encourage parental involvement and leaves teachers to work in isolation in this area, many teachers may try to avoid parental contact. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) identified a vicious cycle emerging where neither parents or teachers take an active communication role. Newly qualified teachers could feel pressured into this pattern if this is how other staff members behave. Therefore, it is essential that all staff model and support an ethos of parent involvement within the school.

Comer and Haynes (1991) found there is evidence in the literature to support the idea that parental involvement is generally more successful in schools where administration and staff share a true commitment to the process. Garcia (2004) proposes the "responsibility for initiating and maintaining parental involvement in schools is not solely the role of selected individuals but must be perceived as a cooperatively shared process" (p.291). If teachers believe that it is a shared process, they may be more likely to engage and feel that their efforts are appreciated and rewarded.

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The school ethos and environment may have a big role to play in teacher self-efficacy and collective efficacy when it comes to accomplishing goals. If a school has an ethos of welcoming parents, working in partnership with parents and including parents in important decisions, teachers may be less likely to follow a teacher-dominated paradigm and they may be motivated to test a variety of tactics and approaches to reach parents. The environment of the school can encourage teachers to achieve certain results and to practice approaches towards parental involvement in a collaborative way (OECD, 2019).

Working collaboratively and feeling supported by administration and staff can give teachers confidence. Some teachers when involved in situations that are unfamiliar to them could experience varying degrees of anxiety and involving parents might be a cause of stress for some teachers who lack an understanding of how to approach the area (Garcia, 2004). In some cases, teacher perceptions of parental involvement can be affected by negative or difficult prior experiences. If a teacher has had many negative experiences, they may adopt a negative stereotype of what parent involvement is. This can lead to teachers being less than enthusiastic about including parents in the educational process and can lead to a lack of importance being shown to this area for the remainder of their teaching career (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Garcia (2004) stated this situation can often occur in “urban schools where limited resources, a lack of supportive home environments, and a cultural mismatch between students’ and individual teachers’ communities constitute the norm rather than the exception” (p. 311).

The school ethos can also influence what teachers view as effective parental involvement and the type of involvement they value. Many teachers may be inclined to value more formal forms of parental involvement if their school puts a heavy emphasis on school-based activities and academic achievements. Many of the formal forms of parent involvement may require attendance

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in person by the parent even though changing societal factors may not allow for this to happen. The effectiveness of both formal and informal types of involvement is supported in the literature (Jeynes, 2007). However, teachers' may not value informal forms of parental involvement if the school does not emphasise and support the idea that parents and families can extend children's learning at home and in the community (Brooker, 2015).

Teachers' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes are important for understanding and improving educational development and they can also be linked to a teachers' strategies for coping with challenges in their daily professional life and to their general well-being. They have also been shown to shape students' learning environment and influence student motivation and educational success (Chester & Beaudin, 1996). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes can facilitate positive changes in related policies such as changes in curricula for initial teacher education or professional development, which may in turn affect student learning.

2.7 Barriers to parental involvement

Research indicates the many barriers which exist to hinder parental involvement in education. The literature suggests parental involvement is more problematic and occurs less in areas identified as disadvantaged or in families identified in lower social groupings (Epstein, 2002; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). As revealed by Hornby and Lafaele (2011) there are many factors that influence the development of effective parental involvement such as the parent and family, child, parent-teacher and societal levels. These barriers will be further examined now.

Hill and Taylor (2004) state "parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face many more barriers to involvement, including nonflexible work schedules, lack of resources, transportation problems, and stress due to residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods" (2004, p.

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162). These barriers along with low-income, language barriers and single-parent families can keep parents preoccupied and distracted, leaving some parents unable to attend school activities or participate in the education of their children on a regular basis (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

A lack of educational attainment can be hugely influential in how involved a parent will be as some parents may suffer from low self-esteem and confidence issues if they have not experienced success in school themselves (Mulkerrins, 2007). These parents may then feel they lack the knowledge and confidence to help their children due to their own experience in school and may have a negative view of education (Gorman, 1998). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) proposed parents with low self-efficacy beliefs are likely to avoid school contact as they believe their children will not benefit positively from their involvement.

Language and culture can be another obstacle to parent involvement. The culture of a family can often affect how parents wish to be involved in their child's education and there can sometimes be a 'clash of cultures' engaging with schools (O'Toole, 2016). Research by Cummins et.al (2005) found it can sometimes be difficult for parents to continue with their own language and cultural identity while they are trying to support their children at school in Ireland. If a school does not embrace the culture of the parents, they may be less involved in their children's education. Schools need to incorporate programmes that are inclusive of all cultures and support the cultural and linguistic goals of parents (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). If a school's language of instruction is not the first language of a parent this can also cause difficulties for communication (Flynn, 2007). This issue was also identified by Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) in their research of Irish-medium immersion schools. Their research showed some parents felt intimidated and had low self-efficacy beliefs with regard to supporting their children's education through Irish (Kavanagh & Hickey, 2013). This brings up the issue of educating teachers on how to support families from minority

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ethnic groups and diverse backgrounds as many Irish teachers come from a particular culture and class (O'Toole et.al., 2019). It is important that teachers do not perceive a lack of involvement by families of differing cultures as indifference, when in reality it could be due to feelings of intimidation or not understanding the education system due to cultural differences.

A further reason for a lack of parent involvement can be attributed to teacher and parent relations. Willard Waller, an American sociologist as far back as 1932 noted that teachers and parents “have much in common...they both wish things to occur for the best interests of the child” but also declared that “the role of parents and teachers as naturally at odds” (Waller, 1932, p.68). Teachers can often use vocabulary and terminology about education that parents have little understanding of. This can cause parents to feel ‘looked down upon’ and could cause teachers to lose the respect and support of parents (Baker & Soden, 1997). Communication of this type can cause difficulties between parents and teachers when building formal relationships. Sometimes barriers can also be caused by the type of contact that a teacher is initiating. If teachers only contact parents when there is an academic or behavioural issue this could possibly lead to conflict and this kind of reactionary parent contact could be linked to high rates of student absenteeism and a negative attitude towards school (Epstein, 2001). Often, teachers can feel unsupported by parents when there is a problem at school. Teachers who feel they do not have parental support often believe it is a waste of their time to contact parents (Flynn, 2007). Teachers should ensure that they are reaching out to parents with positive and negative communication so that they can build an honest relationship which will hopefully lead to parental support in all areas. Parents also need to feel welcomed and sense that teachers and schools have positive facilitating attitudes about parental involvement (Epstein, 2001). When parents perceive that teachers and schools are not open to involving parents this acts as a major barrier to parental involvement.

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Parent and teacher attitudes can also affect levels of parental involvement. Teachers can sometimes feel that their professional status is undermined by too much parent involvement. This can be due to a number of factors such as confidence, experience, low self-esteem or lack of knowledge. Some teachers may not know why or how to involve parents; therefore, administration should support and mentor teachers on the benefits of parental involvement and advise them on techniques for involving parents and creating partnerships (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). However, parent attitudes to parental involvement can also cause issues. Parents who do not value education and feel that it is not their responsibility will not be willing to be actively involved in either formal or informal parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). In contrast Epstein (2001) argues parents with a low-socio economic status can and want to participate in the education of their children as much as middle-class parents. Therefore, to overcome the barriers preventing parental involvement, schools need to provide a welcoming environment where the school staff is respectful and approachable to parents (Wherry, 2009). The HSCL co-ordinator is very important in breaking down these barriers as they lead and coordinate parental involvement activities and programmes in an effort to overcome obstacles between the home and school.

2.8 The importance of the early years of primary school

“Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right” (DES, 2017, p. 6). Early Childhood has been defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child “as birth and throughout infancy; during the preschool years; as well as during the transition to school” (General comment 7, Para 1 & 4). In Ireland this is accepted as the period from 0 to 6 years of age as age 6 is the compulsory age at which children must attend primary school (Corrigan, 2002). The Government of Ireland (1999) notes that the early years are a period of great and rapid development and that the immediate

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environments experienced by children have a profound impact on development. Therefore, the first two years in primary school are a very crucial stage of development and learning for all children. The 1999 Primary School Curriculum states:

The rate of maturation and development, and the pace of learning, is greater during these years than at any subsequent period in a child's life (NCCA, 1999, p.30).

And

The child's experience of learning in the early years will have a profound influence on later learning (NCCA, 1999, p.30).

The foundations for positive school experiences are laid in the early years, and the influence parents can have on academic success becomes more compounded each year (Harris & Robinson, 2016; O'Toole et. al, 2019). Research has consistently found that lasting and important attitudes to learning are crucially shaped in the early years (Harris & Robinson, 2016; Loftus, 2017; Woodhead, 2006). Educational disadvantage can be identified early in a child's life and given that early intervention has been widely proven to be one of the most successful forms of remediation (DES, 2003), there has been a recent shift in thinking in Ireland around the importance of investment in early education.

Ireland has slowly come to appreciate the importance of the early years in the child's developmental experience and has jumped on the global movement towards play based-curriculum frameworks. Prior to the introduction of 'Aistear- the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework', children in their first two years of schooling experienced a curriculum that was distinctive for its formal learning. Aistear was introduced in Ireland in 2009 for all children from birth to six years (NCCA, 2009). The framework was modelled on the New Zealand Curriculum of Te Whariki

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(Gray & Ryan, 2016) and was named ‘Aistear’ meaning journey, because early childhood marks the beginning of children’s lifelong learning journey (NCCA, 2009). Although ‘Aistear’ is not compulsory, it is strongly recommended that pre-schools and infant classes operate in accordance with it and it is being utilised alongside the Primary School Curriculum in infant classes of many primary schools (Murphy, 2014).

These developments in the early childhood curriculum are very important to Ireland as a report by the OECD found that children in Ireland start primary school early, 36% of 4-year-olds attend primary school, which is an exception among OECD countries (OECD, 2015). Most OECD countries achieve full enrolment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for 5-year-olds, whereas in Ireland nearly all 5-year-olds already attend primary school (OECD, 2015). These statistics emphasise that it is vital that these young children attending primary school are following an age-appropriate curriculum and that teachers have been educated on the important aspects of early childhood development such as play based-curriculum, active and inquiry-based learning, building relationships and well-being. This knowledge may be even more important for teachers in DEIS schools as many of these children may be starting school without pre-school experience and already presenting with behaviour difficulties. Interestingly, research by McCoy et al. (2012b) found students attending non-disadvantaged schools are more likely to experience active learning in their classroom than those in disadvantaged DEIS schools (p. 29). While the reasons for such differences are unclear from the research data, the authors suggest that it may be seen as ‘easier’ to manage group/active work with more engaged groups of students. Studies by Murphy (2004) and Dunphy (2009) also noted that infant classes tended to be teacher centered with a dominant whole-class teaching approach.

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Research underpins the belief that the early years of childhood are critical for development and the opportunities for learning that they provide are too precious to neglect (Woodhead, 2006). In these years there is an opportunity for the development of a ‘community of learners’ in schools and classrooms, including parents, teachers and community members who understand and respect each other and where learning and development are considered as processes of participation (Rogoff, 1994).

2.9 Building relationships for positive parental involvement

Both ‘Aistear’ and ‘Síolta’ highlight the important role parents and families play in children’s lives and ‘Aistear’ names ‘building partnerships between parents and practitioners’ as one of its guidelines for good practice. Through the themes of Well Being, Identity and Belonging, Communication and Exploring and Thinking the Aistear guidelines emphasise parents as the most important people in children’s early lives and that by working together parents and practitioners can enhance children’s learning and development (NCCA, 2009). Importantly it also argues that graduating from pre-school to junior infants or starting school is a huge transition for children and that a partnership approach is very beneficial at this time of change in children’s lives (NCCA, 2009). Aistear offers many suggestions on how practitioners can build relationships with parents and get parents involved in their child’s schooling. These include, sharing curriculum information and resources with parents, inviting parents to spend time in the setting and developing a newsletter which provides useful information such as the words of songs and rhymes that the children are learning (NCCA, 2009). The guidelines propose all life for young children is shaped by relationships and stress that building relationships is the cornerstone of a parent-practitioner and practitioner-child partnership developing. As identified by Baker and Manfredi/Petitt (2004) children need to be cared for by adults who are able to invest emotionally in their well-being and

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adults who care about them, not just for them. Therefore, teaching in the early years of primary school is primarily about relationships. ‘It is a social endeavour’ which is as much about children developing a sense of belonging as it is about learning skills or acquiring knowledge (Hayes, 2010; NCCA, 2009).

In the area of developmental psychology many theorists have emphasised the importance of interactions and relationships including Erikson, Piaget, Bowlby, Ainsworth and Vygotsky. Erikson focused on the importance of an infant developing trust vs mistrust while Bowlby emphasised the importance of early attachments between caregivers and infants and stressed how this sensitive period of child development is important to future emotional and social development (Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012). Both Bowlby and Ainsworth believed that early relationships provide a prototype for later relationships in adulthood through the development of an internal working model (IWM) (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2009). Like Bowlby, Vygotsky believed in the power of interactions and recognised the importance of context to learning and development, emphasising the role of culture in driving human development (Parrish, 2014). Vygotsky’s attention to the critical role of the social context to individual learning and development can be seen as a precursor to Bronfenbrenner’s later Bio-ecological systems theory (Hayes, O’Toole & Halpenny, 2017). This theory mirrors current societal structures and puts the child at the center of the ecological system. Surrounding the child are multiple layers of influence, the Microsystem (Immediate environment, family, school, neighbourhood), the Mesosystem (Interactions between immediate environments), the Exosystem (External environments that have an indirect effect, e.g. parental workplace), the Macrosystem (Cultural context, beliefs, values and norms of behaviour) and the Chronosystem (Changes over time) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; O’Brien, 2011). The Microsystem is the most significant layer of the child’s life which includes the direct influences of

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family, teachers, neighbours, community, school, and peers. For optimal development and learning, the child needs strong supports and influences in their immediate environment. In essence, Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological model of development offers a useful framework to support and sustain high-quality education in the early school years (Hayes & Filipović, 2017). The model emphasises that parents, teachers, schools and community must be working in tandem as they are overlapping spheres of influence and are all of considerable importance for the optimal development of children (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Relational Teaching is a core value that many progressive educators have long embraced (Baker & Manfredi/Petitt, 2004). Relational teaching indicates that teachers who have knowledge about their students will be better able to teach them. It describes the complex social environment in which children and educators converse, share experiences, and participate in activities that, together, make for engaged learning. Relational teaching, when done well, recognises the human stories of the learners themselves, they are not blank slates, as well as that of the teacher (Baker & Manfredi/Petitt, 2004). These give-and-take processes also drive development and learning and teachers must highlight the role of a pedagogy that attends to the unique nature of the child in their immediate present, through the power of relationships and interactions (Hayes & Filipović, 2017). Relationship building is perhaps the foundation of parental involvement and the teacher is an essential part of building the reciprocal relationships with parents and families (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

Communication is key when developing positive relationships and regardless of a parent's direct involvement in school activities, it is vital for parents and teachers to communicate effectively with one another (Gonzalez et al., 2013). Both the parent and teacher see the child daily so each holds a piece of the picture of the child's development. When information is shared

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through constant and honest communication it helps to ensure that both schools and homes are responsive to student's unique needs and therefore better equipped to support children's overall development (O'Toole, 2016).

It is important that some of this interaction is face to face and it must be considered as a fundamental part of schooling. Adequate time must be provided during working hours for school staff to engage in this and teachers must be encouraged to talk informally with parents (Smyth, 2017). At the same time, this communication must be recognised as a critical part of parenting and parents must make the commitment to occasionally meet with their children's teachers. (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Despite all the evidence that supports good communication between parents and teachers a study by O'Kane (2007) stated there was a general lack of communication between teachers and parents.

2.10 Conclusion

All the research and literature indicate that parental involvement can positively impact a child's education. Parents want their children to be successful in school, yet many parents may not know how to support their child's education. Teachers want their students to reach their full potential but often struggle in providing effective parental involvement opportunities. It is essential that parents and teachers recognise and accept their responsibilities in striving for student academic achievement. This chapter has presented a review of the literature on parental involvement, outlining empirical findings and presenting the conceptual underpinnings of the present research. The next chapter will examine the methods and procedures used in this study to determine the perceptions of teachers concerning parental involvement.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of the study is to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding parental involvement in children's education and the effect that their experiences and perceptions may have on their facilitation of parental involvement and on their classroom teaching. Parental involvement has been widely researched in the field of education. However, the more it is studied, the more it appears further research is required. This inconsistency exists due to the many differing definitions of parental involvement. The significance of this work lies in its study of the perceptions of those primarily involved in the education of children in schools: teachers.

This chapter will outline the research questions, research method, design and data collection procedures chosen to conduct the study. Data analysis procedures are explained and ethics, limitations, validity, creditability, and confirmability are discussed.

3.2 Educational Research

Educational research has come under increasing scrutiny not only from teachers and policy-makers but also from within the educational research community. Hargreaves (1996) is of the view that "educational research is poor value for money" (p. 1) and often of an indifferent quality. As a solution, Hargreaves advocates that educational research would be more practically relevant if it were undertaken by practicing teachers. Positivists have criticised educational research as being un-substantive with no numbers or hard facts to back up research and when compared to the medical field where the research is mostly cumulative, educational research is profoundly non-cumulative (Hargreaves, 1996). When comparing the medical and education profession Hargreaves states "the two professions see the role of scientific knowledge in informing

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professional practice very differently” (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 1). Ireland recognises the need for the development of the continuum between initial and continuous training for our primary teachers (Banks & Smyth, 2011). While there are formal professional development opportunities available to teachers’ barriers such as time, funding and motivation may discourage participation.

The last twenty years has brought about unprecedented change in education and the complex role of the teacher. Teachers today are expected to not only deliver a curriculum effectively, but they also have to contend with “outside influences such as instilling values, helping students’ cope with social disadvantages and providing them with an understanding of today’s information age” (INTO, 2017, p. 40). Teaching as a job has certainly transitioned from where it was twenty years ago, particularly in infant classrooms where didactic teaching methods have been replaced with play-based learning through the introduction of Aistear-The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. In order for teachers to familiarise themselves with new developments in education there has been a growing emphasis internationally on the concept of teacher education as a continuous and ongoing process (INTO, 2017).

The take-up of formal and informal learning opportunities for teachers has been the subject of much debate in education research worldwide (Banks & Smyth, 2011). Furthermore, The OECD (2005) also noted that ‘attracting, retaining and developing teachers’ across the professional life-cycle have become policy priorities in many countries. Day et al. (2007) note that professional development and practitioner research is essential for improved instructional practices, pedagogy, student outcomes and can lead to positive improvements in the educational landscape.

3.3 Research Questions

Moustakas (1994) notes that ‘phenomenological research should produce questions which have a clear statement and provide for social and personal relevance’ (Moustakas, 1994). The central research title and related sub questions which guided this study are:

Central research title: Infant teachers’ perceptions on parental involvement in DEIS schools.

1. How do infant teachers report their understanding of parental involvement?
2. What does parental involvement look like in the first two years of primary school?
What involvement activities/strategies do infant teachers find most effective?
3. Do infant teachers see a relationship between parental involvement and student achievement and how would they describe this?
4. How have teachers’ personal and professional experiences with parental involvement shaped their approach to building relationships with students and their parents?
5. How do infant teachers work with HSCL to encourage parental involvement?
6. What are the potential challenges teachers may face when engaging with parents?

3.4 Research Paradigm/Approach

Ethical, purposeful, well-designed, credible, empirical, imaginative research, can contribute positively to our understanding of the world (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). However, any evolution of the standard research process must be driven by a holistic analysis of the paradigm under which the research takes place. Willis (2007) explains that: “A paradigm is thus a comprehensive belief system, world view, or framework that guides research and practice in a field” (p.8). Different paradigms give us alternative perspectives on the world (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) and paradigms have implications for

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methodological selections and types of knowledge produced (Mertens, 2015). Existing studies on research methodology largely differentiate between three potential paradigms that may underpin educational research; the positivist paradigm, the interpretive paradigm and the critical paradigm (Blair, 2010).

The positivist paradigm draws on the concepts of the natural sciences in appreciating only what is empirically measurable and quantifiable (O'Toole, 2016). This paradigm seeks to discover universal causes, principles and 'truths' applicable to all people and situations (Mukherji & Albon, 2014). This approach is generally used for large-scale research and the research is conducted 'from the outside' which leads to quantitative methods being predominant.

Mukherji and Albon (2014) define interpretivism as an approach which accepts that 'truth' varies based on the perspectives of those involved and the context in which research is being conducted. This approach is more likely to rely on qualitative rather than quantitative methodologies, although both approaches may potentially be employed within this paradigm. The interpretive paradigm states that knowledge is socially constructed and research is a product of the values of researchers which cannot be independent of them (Mukherji & Albon, 2014). Qualitative methods such as interviews, observations and document reviews are predominant in this paradigm.

Critical theory paradigm directly addresses politics in research. Inequalities, social justices linked to political and social action are addressed. Inclusion of diverse voices from the margins is vitally important, with participatory action research to the fore (Mukherji & Albon, 2014).

For this study an interpretive paradigm is appropriate as it is rooted in the fact that there are multiple realities and that they are socially constructed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). It is theoretically understood that an interpretive paradigm allows researchers to view the world

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through the perceptions and experiences of the participants (Mukherji & Albon, 2014). In seeking answers, the researcher who chooses to follow an interpretive paradigm uses those experiences to construct and interpret his/her understanding from gathered data (Creswell, 2003).

3.5 Qualitative Research

As already noted, qualitative methods are dominant in the Interpretivist paradigm as they allow the researcher to conduct a study in its natural setting and have personal contact with participants. Researchers can collect qualitative data via various methods such as interviews, case studies, observations or focus groups. Qualitative research approaches and methods produce rich robust understandings of participants' emotions, feelings, opinions, and experiences with resulting valuable insights and new knowledge. Qualitative research can depend on a small number of participants to provide a depth of data.

In stark contrast quantitative research provides a breadth of data for analysis. Quantitative research is obtained from empirical testing, is scientific, logical and provides objectivity, reliability, generality and reductionism (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). The attraction of quantitative research is the potential for identifying patterns, detecting causes and consequences and generalising findings (Denscombe, 2003).

In this research, using quantitative research was not likely to be productive. It was unlikely that the researcher would gather 'depth' and 'insight' from the statistics that are commonly used in quantitative methods. Therefore, in order to satisfy the objectives of this research, a qualitative approach was chosen. Qualitative research is mostly appropriate for small samples and offers a complete account and analysis of a research subject, without limiting scope or a participant's responses (Collis & Hussey, 2003). However, as the effectiveness of qualitative research is heavily

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based on the skills, abilities and perception of the researcher, the outcomes may not be viewed as completely reliable (Bell, 2005). In addition, as it is more appropriate for small samples, the results of qualitative research may often not be perceived as reflecting the opinions of a wider population (Bell, 2005).

The main types of qualitative research include observation, case study, document analysis and interviews (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). As this research sought to explain infant teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding parental involvement it was decided the best method to collect qualitative data from the teachers was through interviews. Interviews can be used as the principal method of gathering information or in conjunction with other methods. They can be used for validation, to follow up on unexpected results or to explore the motivations of respondents (Cohen et al. 2000).

3.6 Research Instrument- Telephone Interviews

Because of a public health situation, it was impossible to conduct face to face interviews. Therefore, telephone interviews were carried out as an alternative. Interviews have been described by Cohen et.al. (2007) as “a conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by research objectives” (p. 351). As this research is exploring infant teachers' perceptions of parental involvement it was felt that interviews would offer data based on emotions, feelings and experiences which correlates with the theme of the research. Research interviews can vary from highly structured to unstructured. In unstructured interviews, the interaction is primarily participant driven and led by the interviewee. In structured interviews, a set of predetermined questions are asked by the researcher in a fixed order, with little to no deviation from the set list of questions (Cohen et al. 2011; Robert-Holmes, 2005). For this particular study, a semi-structured

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interview format was chosen. Evans and Fuller (1999) discuss the concept of ‘creating an informal, non-threatening environment’ through the use of semi-structured interviews. As noted by Roberts-Holmes, (2005), “In the semi-structured and unstructured interview the focus is shifted away from the researcher with the fixed interview schedule and towards the issues and interests of the research participants” (p. 109). A semi-structured interview enables the interviewer to approach the interview with a set of topics and questions to be asked in the interview but it is at the interviewer’s discretion as to which order the questions are asked and to probe for further information. It also allows the interviewer to follow tangents which may appear important to the interviewee but may not have been planned for in the interview design procedure. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) note that the emphasis is on asking open-ended questions to allow the respondents to express their own perceptions, understanding and personal meanings of a phenomena.

Many of the drawbacks of interviews apply regardless of the particular type. Interviews take a lot of time, they are open to interviewer bias, and they can be inconvenient and may raise anonymity concerns (Cohen et al. 2011). While a telephone interview may have a practical attraction such as no travel or cost, the literature has raised concerns with regard to the lack of rapport between the interviewer and interviewee and the loss of non-verbal communication such as gestures which aid communication (Glogowska, Young & Lockyer, 2010). Other difficulties that could arise with telephone interviews are the need for interviewer concentration and energy to keep the interview on course and to facilitate unstilted conversation (Glogowska et al. 2010). There is also the possibility of respondents being distracted by other things around them while they are being interviewed. Some literature highlights that some respondents may be more willing to discuss certain subjects over the telephone and may feel physically safer doing so than in face-to-face interviews (Chapple, 1999). Wilson et al. (1998) discusses the ‘pseudonymity’ achieved

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by telephone interviewing because of the lack of visually seeing the other person and the distancing effect of the telephone interview could prove helpful in some cases and may improve the quality of the data collected.

3.7 Research Sample

A snowball approach was used to recruit participants from six primary schools in urban Dublin. The population in this study comprised of ten infant class teachers, three from senior infants and seven from junior infants. All six schools were designated DEIS urban schools in Dublin. The teachers interviewed represent a wide variety of years of experience and education levels. These areas will be discussed further in chapter four as part of the data findings.

3.8 Research Method

Interview questions were drafted using a semi-structured interview approach and the interview questions were written in a clear format with appropriate use of language for the field of research (See Appendix C). One pilot semi-structured telephone interview took place with a colleague to ensure questions were appropriate and to check the length of the interview. It is generally accepted in the literature that the time permitted for a telephone interview will be shorter than for a face-to-face interview (Wilson et al. 1998). De Vaus (2002) suggests that thirty minutes is a reasonable time for a telephone interview, although other researchers have found both shorter and longer times acceptable (Ryan et al. 2001). Once the pilot interview was reviewed participants were contacted by text message to organise a convenient time to conduct the interview. While planning interview times the researcher was aware that time would be needed for 'debriefing' after each interview. Therefore, interviews were spaced accordingly, this also ensured that respondents felt they were listened to and that their contribution was valued and seen as important. Ten semi-

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structured telephone interviews took place during the months of March and April. Teachers were telephoned in their homes at the appointed time and each interview was expected to take approximately 30 minutes. To collect high quality data, it is important to plan carefully the way it is recorded. The researcher felt that maintaining a telephone conversation and keeping track of questions and writing notes would be difficult therefore permission was sought from and given by respondents to digitally record the interviews.

As first impressions are likely to be equally as important over the telephone as in face-to-face meetings, an informal introductory script was designed to sound professional yet friendly as the telephone call started. The informal introductory script was not recorded. The researcher then continued with the semi-structured interview questions. When the interview was complete recording stopped and time was left at the end of each interview for debriefing and an informal end to the telephone call.

3.9 Ethics

As stated in Roberts-Holmes (2005), “Gaining the participants informed consent to carry out the research is part of building trust in the relationship between yourself and the participants” (p. 61).

Approval for the study was sought and granted from the Research Ethics Committee in Marino Institute of Education. The research proposal was deemed to be a low-risk study. Responsibility to carry out research in a way that values the rights of participants is implicit when considering ethics and caution in conducting educational research is advised (Cohen et.al., 2011). Interviews involve social interaction and produce information about the human condition so therefore there are three main ethical issues that need to be addressed: Informed consent,

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confidentiality and the consequences of the interviews (Cohen et.al., 2011). Although this research study was unlikely to cause harm to the participants involved, it was important to establish full and informed consent from all participants prior to their involvement. A cover letter was provided in advance of the telephone interviews which explained the nature of the research, what was expected of participants, any possible risks of the research and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any stage as well as withdrawing any unprocessed data (See Appendix A). The cover letter was accompanied by a consent form. This information was emailed to participants and they gave written consent by signing the consent form and returning it by email. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this way (See Appendix B). Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were respected at all times and any guarantee given to participants was observed. All telephone interviews were recorded using two digital recorders, one as back up, and later transcribed. All interviews were deleted from digital recorders once they were transferred to an encrypted laptop. Full confidentiality was adhered to and all the data was securely stored. Data will need to be kept for thirteen months after which it will be destroyed.

3.10 Limitations

Although the interpretive paradigm has its strength in exploring a given phenomenon and providing valuable information, it also has some limitations. It is important to remember that each method of research is accompanied by its own set of limitations (Denscombe, 2003).

The first limitation is that this is small scale research with a small sample size of ten infant classroom teachers. Thus, the findings from this research cannot be extended to wider populations with the same degree of certainty that quantitative analyses can (Cohen et al. 2011). This is because the findings of the research are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to chance. Many positivists have questioned the usefulness of interpretive

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research. However, interpretive research of a high quality can be transferred to other contexts and teachers can benefit from it.

The second limitation relates to the area of ‘insider research’. As the researcher is a teacher interviewing other teachers this may cause a possible perceived power imbalance between the researcher and participants which may lead to the honesty and truthfulness of responses being compromised. Also, as the data is self-reported teachers may have been telling the researcher what they thought the researcher wanted to hear so there may be an aspect of social desirability in their responses. These limitations may be addressed by ensuring anonymity for all taking part in the study but as noted by Kvale (2007) in interviews both parties are not equal and every interview “entails asymmetrical power relation” (p. 14).

Marshall and Rossman (2011) highlight the area of researchers own biases and how they may impact on the research process and results. A researcher has the important job of convincing others of the usefulness of the proposed research. A researcher can argue that qualitative research leads to rich, detailed conclusions and recommendations, however it is equally important that researchers recognise their assumptions and biases. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), in a qualitative study the researcher is the human instrument for data collection unlike other instruments such as questionnaires which may be used in quantitative studies. The researcher must ensure personal biases do not influence findings. The researcher must identify and acknowledge biases and engage in ongoing critical reflection to ensure adequate depth and relevance of data collection and analysis. Engaging in on-going conversation with other researchers can help to reduce research bias.

3.11 Validity and Reliability

Anderson (2010) argued that when performed correctly qualitative research is “valid, reliable, credible and rigorous” (p. 2). The reliability of the study depends on the strategies used to gather the data and on researcher ability, effort and reliability (Rolfe, 2006). Other terminology that has been used in qualitative research is credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of the data gathering techniques proposed in this research are well documented in research literature (Cohen et. al., 2011; Cresswell, 2003; Denscombe, 2003).

3.12 Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the degree to which the results reflect the true and accurate experiences of the participants (Krefting, 1991). To improve credibility, the researcher aims to support participants in providing honest and authentic information throughout the interviews. Effort was made to create a relaxed and collaborative atmosphere over the phone by having a casual introductory conversation before interviews began. Recording of the interview script only began when the interview questions started and participants were given a warning of the recording commencing. The researcher encouraged participants to elaborate on responses which warranted additional explanation. To further enhance the credibility of the study, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Participants in the study were provided with a copy of the transcript of their interview. The participants were asked to read the transcripts and verify that it accurately represented what they had intended to express.

3.13 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings reflect the participants’ overall intent and meaning, rather than those of the researcher (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Good internal

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confirmability refers to the accurate interpretation of the results. However, interpretation will always be open to inconsistency. The participants' contributions were interpreted and represented accurately and data was crosschecked on an on-going basis. Confirmability was enhanced through the use of reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the continual examination of the researcher's impact upon the development and construction of knowledge (Malterud, 2001). Relating the data gathered to the literature assisted confirmability and while it cannot be guaranteed that the findings of this research represent the same interpretation as any other person, every effort was made to allow the teacher voice speak for itself. It is hoped that the reader will be able to make his or her own interpretation of the experiences described and that this will provide for transferability whereby the reader will be able to make personal judgments concerning the ability of the study's findings to be transferred and applied to other settings (Krefting, 1991).

The researcher was thorough with record keeping which demonstrated a clear decision trail and ensured that interpretations of data were consistent and transparent. During analysis the researcher sought out similarities and differences across accounts to ensure reflection of different perspectives and the teacher's voice was represented by including rich verbatim descriptions of accounts to support findings.

Data triangulation, whereby different methods and perspectives help produce a more comprehensive set of findings, is recommended to ensure reliability of qualitative research studies but due to time constraints this was not an option during this research.

3.14 Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state that "analysis involves working with the data, organising it and breaking it down into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering

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what is important and what is to be learned and deciding what to tell others” (p.153). They also highlight that qualitative data should not be over-analysed and the richness of the language and descriptions of interviewees should not be lost (Bogden & Biklen, 1992).

In this research a 'thematic analyses' technique was adopted to analyse the data generated from the semi-structured interviews. This method is widely used within qualitative research and was most suited to the nature of this research. For the 'thematic' analysis Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by step guide to analysing data was used. The first phase involved the transcribing of interviews and the reading and re-reading of the transcripts. Following this the process of coding involving close examination of the text and using colour coding strategy to highlight similar themes arising began. It was also important to take breaks from the data analysis to give time to re-think and review the arising themes before finalising and making a report of the key themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved more than just a linear route as it involved moving back and forth between the identified stages of data. Therefore, the data was carefully scrutinised looking for similarities and differences in the teacher's perceptions of parental involvement.

3.15 Conclusion

In this chapter the types of research methodologies available were evaluated. The research method and approach were presented and discussed in detail to justify their use. In addition, the chapter included a description of the data gathering procedure, data analysis and concerns about ethics, validity, confirmability and credibility, as well as the limitations of the study, designed to answer the main research question.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings aiming to shed light on infant teachers' perspectives regarding parental involvement in early years classrooms. The data which emerged from the semi-structured interviews is presented under four key themes. These themes are: Teacher Background, Education and Experience, Barriers/Challenges to Parental Involvement, School Ethos and Whole-School Approach to parental involvement and the Early Years of Primary School. The views of respondents are summarised under these key themes using sub-headings and include direct quotes from the interviewees to show the depth and richness of this qualitative data.

4.2 Teacher Background, Education and Experience

A teacher's own background and personal experience in school can have a great impact on how they teach children and how they perceive things in the classroom and with parents. Teachers who have grown up with positive parental involvement in their own education may view the lack of parental involvement in a negative way and may assume a belief that these parents are not interested in their children's education. One way that a teachers' perceptions could be altered is through education and professional development.

"In an education setting, professional development contains activities, experiences and processes that enhance teachers' knowledge, beliefs and understandings" (Weir, Kavanagh, Kelleher & Moran, 2017, p.23). Effective professional development should result in improved student achievement through changes in teachers' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices (Weir et al. 2017). This potential for change is particularly recognised in addressing disadvantage.

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4.2.1 Growing up with parental involvement

Most of the teachers revealed their parents were actively involved in their education growing up. This included attendance at parent teacher meetings, help with homework and some parents were active on parent associations or Boards of Management. A few participants stated that when they were in school the parents were not invited into classrooms and that parents were mostly involved with activities at home, extra-curricular sporting activities and school fundraising events.

There was nothing like what we do nowadays in our school, bringing parents in for different craft days etc. None of that was happening then in the school that I was in. But if they were available, my parents probably would have made time.

Many of the participants stated that parental expectations around the level of education they received and school attendance was very high in their home. Education appeared to be valued very highly and environments were created that supported the participants to succeed in education.

.....it was huge in my house, especially by my mom, she would have been third level educated and would have really wanted us to go to third level. So, I know just one example, we were never allowed miss a day of school, we would have to really be on death's door to get a day off school.

The majority reported it was expected of them to attend a third level college. Seven out of ten participants completed undergraduate courses and then continued on to complete a postgraduate or master's degree. One teacher stated her parents were not involved in her education because they did not need to be involved because she pushed and motivated herself. This teacher

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went on to explain that having worked in a DEIS school she now thought parental involvement was possibly more important than even her job as a teacher.

4.2.2 Initial teacher training courses.

Although some had completed their college courses many years ago only one participant could remember their teacher training including a particular focus on parental involvement. It was noted that parental involvement would have been discussed informally during various lecture topics and would have come up here and there in discussion but there was not a particular focus or series of lectures on the topic of working with parents.

No not formally, I think, a bit informally, they had stuff. I say.... when we were doing our English, they might have talked about you know getting parents in to do paired reading and those kind of programmes, but there was no kind of formal training on parent involvement like lectures or anything like that.

Some participants maintained that when parental involvement came up in lectures it was mainly focused on how to deal with certain parents or was around tips, ideas and methods to deal with angry parents if they came to your door.

Not officially or formally from what I can remember. I mean, during lectures, yes, there would be you know, talk about it or, you know, any sort of questions they might be geared towards, and how would you deal with certain parents, you know, through this and through that, but from what I remember, no, there was no official parental classes or this is how you deal with parents or anything like that.

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Interestingly it seems that teacher training has not changed very much from over thirty years ago where one teacher cited that parental involvement was something that was hardly mentioned in her course and that:

...it would always have been stressed that the primary educators of the children are the parents. That would have been the height of mentioning anything to do with parents, bringing parents into school or mentioning it that way would not have come into anything. It would have been down to us ourselves in what we did.

Kavanagh, Shiel, Gileece and Kiniry (2015) found that teachers did not always know how to forge relationships with parents and recommended an increased emphasis on parental involvement in Initial Teacher Education. They felt that this would support teachers in exploring the needs of parents and provide positive ways of making connections with them (Kavanagh, Shiel, Gileece & Kiniry, 2015).

The topic of parental involvement in relation to teacher training is not one that appears to be significant for many of the participants. However, many of the participants noted that when they started teaching, they realised it was one of the most important elements of a child's education. One participant who has been teaching for nine years said that parental involvement was something she struggled with when she began her teaching career. She said that the time around parent teacher meetings would make her feel especially anxious and she would sometimes ask another teacher to sit with her. She stated: ".....it was definitely something that I found difficult and at the beginning of my career probably tried to avoid it as much as possible in the sense of try to avoid even my parents as much as possible....."

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Many of the teachers felt that there should be more formal training around the area of parental involvement and that there should be more supports put in place especially for a newly qualified teacher (NQT). One admitted that “it is a bit bizarre when you look at it that we are given so many tools to deal with the children but in actual fact we're rarely advised on how to manage parents”.

Teachers also revealed if they had more formal training in this area, they may be more able to get parents involved and that training could equip them with strategies in managing parents. Participants noted how they learned through experience, those who had worked in other schools noted the experience can differ depending on whether you are working in a DEIS school and also where the school is located. Almost all participants declared that working in a DEIS school brings different challenges when it comes to parents and education and one participant said there should be more training made available to teachers in DEIS schools around the area of parental involvement.

Worryingly the call for more attention to be given to the topic of parental involvement in Initial Teacher Education has been repeated for over almost two decades (Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde & Mutton, 2018). Epstein in particular had highlighted that the lack of preparation of pre-service teachers as being problematic (Epstein, 2013). Epstein notes that collaborating with parents is a core professional competency of teachers and that it should be given just as much attention as other competencies that are addressed in Initial Teacher Education such as assessment and classroom management (Epstein, 2013).

4.2.3 Continuous Professional Development

Data shows that parental involvement as a topic in the area of continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers is practically non-existent and there is little research completed on the topic. None of the participants had participated in or come across this type of professional development. One teacher had completed some training days on the area of parental involvement while she was undertaking a homeschool liaison role in the school. Many of the teachers had completed CPD which appeared to have an academic focus while some had completed courses on building relationships, however they said that the focus was only on building relationships with children. The majority of participants stated they would be interested in if training on parental involvement was available to them.

I probably would if I'm honest, because I'm always looking for ways, especially in my area. I'm looking for ways of helping parents who can't read and write, how to help them help their kids. So, it would be something I'd be involved in.

However, a few teachers revealed that because they had been teaching a few years and had gained experience working with parents it was not a topic that they would put at the top of their priority list for CPD, but felt this area is definitely important for NQTs. Another teacher indicated it could depend on the person as some people are naturally good at dealing with people which could benefit them when working with parents. One participant stated that the area of CPD on parental involvement would be better suited to a whole-school training approach or use of Croke Park hours as she felt that it was something that would be important for the whole school ethos.

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4.2.4 Teachers views on parental involvement

For the majority of participants parental involvement encompassed both home and school. As discussed in chapter two this can be described as formal and informal involvement. While this question was not specifically asked during the interview, data from the interviews confirm teachers placed a lot of emphasis on homework and homework support. Most teachers also referred to the importance of parents attending parent-teacher meetings and courses for parents organized by the school. Most participants acknowledged parents' eagerness to help and be involved especially in infant classes. Several teachers reported encouraging this by requesting parents to sign homework journals for the children.

Communication with parents was highlighted and several teachers explained how daily communication with parents happened either when the children were being dropped to school or at pick-up time. Research by Gonzalez et al., (2018) note that responsive communication structures that allows parents to engage in a way that is convenient, open and flexible is one of the key approaches to building good home-school partnerships. O'Toole (2016) proposed this communication can happen in both an informal way, such as at the school door, but also through formal means, such as homework journals or technology-based communication systems like ClassDojo. However, she also noted that one of the most important interactions between a teacher and parent was a simple greeting in the morning and evening (O'Toole, 2016).

Findings from the interviews revealed that involving parents in classroom activities was not a priority for many participants and this issue will be dealt with under the theme of confidentiality.

4.3 Barriers to parental involvement

Although all participants remained very positive about the benefits of parental involvement for the child the school and the teacher, they also indicated barriers and challenges to this involvement. These included: confidentiality, Garda Vetting, motivation and ability, teacher attitude, value of activity.

4.3.1 Confidentiality

Although the majority of the teachers seemed open to having parents visit their classrooms there appeared to be a hesitancy with regard to dealing with possible mis-behaviour in front of a parent in the classroom. Some teachers were apprehensive that correcting a child in front of a parent may bring up many issues. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) noted that “teachers and parents each bring personal attitudes that are deeply rooted within their own historical, economic, educational, ethnic, class and gendered experiences” (p.45). Hornby (2000) noted that some teachers can have a deficit view of parents whereby parents are viewed as “problems”, “vulnerable”, or “less able” and are therefore best kept out of schools (Hornby, 2000, p.4/5). The issue of confidentiality was raised by a number of participants and also appeared to be one of the factors that might influence teachers having parents in the classroom. This could be linked to deficit ideology such as an imbalance in power relations or a need for control by a teacher. However, this could also be linked to a lack of self-confidence on the teacher’s part due to inexperience. One teacher stated there was an issue in her school with parents coming into classrooms and later talking about other kids or the teacher with other parents. This participant revealed that this incident encouraged her to create a guidance book for parents.

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So, I put a book, I put a little policy book together after that, so now when parents are getting involved, we give them a little booklet to read and just to kind of make sure that doesn't happen again.

It was noted by several teachers that planning, structure and managing parent expectations were important when organising parent activities in the classroom and that these might help with issues around confidentiality. Some teachers highlighted the importance of open and honest communication when dealing with parents so that different versions of stories do not get spread in almost a 'Chinese Whispers' type scenario. According to O'Kane (2007) schools' expectations of parents are often not outlined as clearly as their expectations of children and it is the schools'. It is the school and teachers' responsibility to ensure that parents clearly understand what is expected of them and that policies and practices are clearly explained.

4.3.2 *Garda Vetting*

Most of the teachers referred to Garda Vetting requirements. Two teachers reported parents were brought in at the beginning of the school year and asked to complete Garda Vetting forms which would allow them to attend school trips and attend classroom activities. Some courses run by HSCL such as 'Maths for Fun' and 'Literacy for Fun' did not need parents to be Garda Vetted as the teacher was present at all times. However, participants reported many other activities now happening in their schools required parents to be Garda vetted. One teacher revealed that before strict policies were brought in by her school around parental involvement a lot of parents had struggled to come in the front door as it was almost like facing their fears of revisiting their own schooldays. She said when they did eventually come in, they were always made very welcome

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and there was a very active parent group in the school. However, this teacher noted times have now changed and she fears that Garda Vetting may be a huge obstacle for some parents.

The Garda clearance has been a huge obstacle. I feel parents now are very reluctant to come forward because if they have to get Garda clearance I don't know and I don't want to know what their backgrounds are. And I don't feel the Garda clearance for any parents coming into my room is ever necessary, because at all times, I will be there supervising and I just think that is an over the top reaction by boards of management or whoever, to stop parents coming in.

Another teacher stated that out of her whole class she only has two parents Garda Vetted making it very difficult for her to include other parents in any type of classroom activities. Another noted only one of her parents had filled in a Garda vetting form despite several parents being invited to do so.

Three participants who did not refer to the vetting process appeared to have high levels of parental involvement with parents being invited into the schools for reading, maths games, crafts and book fairs. However, one of these stated the school had to stop certain activities.

We used to have parents coming in and reading outside the classroom with the children. But we kind of stopped that when all the Garda vetting came in because we couldn't guarantee that this practice was falling in line with that.

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Although many of these measures are put in place by Boards of Management there appears to be a difference in practice between schools in relation to Garda vetting and this will be further explored later.

4.3.3 Motivation, parent ability and activity

A majority of the participants raised issues around the challenge of parent motivation and ability. This challenge was stated in the context of parents own experience of school. Teachers said some parents may have had negative experiences themselves in school, leading them to be less motivated to get involved. Research by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001), showed that parent's construction of their role for involvement in their children's education is often based on personal experience. And Kiely (2017) found that some parents' lack of involvement with their child's school was due to a lack of confidence caused by negative school experiences.

Several participants said there was often a core group of parents involved in classroom activities and school volunteering and they felt that sometimes other parents can be intimidated by this. Most stated it was usually the children whose parents were involved who were successful in the classroom and had a positive outlook on school.

But I think it's generally a big portion of parents trying to run away from you and then a good handful of the reliable's that are always there. But it does tend to be the ones who always want to be involved whose children are probably doing the best anyway.

Teachers who had experience of teaching senior classes revealed parents were less likely to be involved as the children got older and that most parents in infant classes were enthusiastic to

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be involved. Many teachers indicated if the infant classes were fun and involved parents this might lead to positive attitudes for both parents and children in later years. Daniel (2015) proposed parents tend to be more involved in their children's education at pre-school and primary level and that involvement tends to decrease as children get older. Data shows the decrease in parental involvement is happening earlier in DEIS schools even though evidence shows parental involvement is valuable for children of all ages (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Many teachers reported the support they receive from HSCL in reaching out to parents to try and encourage their involvement whether it is in school courses, parent associations or classroom initiatives is invaluable. However, many teachers said poor turnout was an issue in courses offered to parents by the HSCL. One teacher stated "I think its willingness of parents, you know a lot of them would express an interest, but then actually getting down to it. They don't turn up". Poor turnout could also be down to changing societal factors such as lack of time, working parents and possible lack of childcare to attend courses. As already discussed, some participants proposed parents may have had a negative experience in school. Some participants said they have parents who struggle to be involved due to lack of academic skills such as reading and writing and also parents who lack confidence in getting involved.

Teaching the parents games was probably the biggest challenge we had as teachers because the parents were afraid.... they didn't really know what to do. And reading rules, taking in literacy skills and things an awful lot of stuff that we think you can just play, for example Snakes and Ladders by rolling the dice and doing it, they really needed practice to become confident playing these games.

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According to O'Toole (2016) approaches to positive home-school partnerships that actively work to target parents' confidence, self-efficacy, beliefs and understanding that their input matters are very effective.

The literature shows that schools that have been successful in overcoming potential barriers have put structures and contextual supports in place and that these have been characterised by capacity to engage parents, respectful and effective leadership in relation to families and children, and institutionalised authentic partnerships (Ma et al., 2016).

4.4 School ethos and whole-school approach to parental involvement

Bronfenbrenner's Bio- Ecological Model places the school in the microsystem which is the smallest and most immediate environment in which children live. This theory suggests that positive school interaction between parents, children and teachers influences how a child develops. Epstein and Sanders (2006) also emphasise parenting skills, communication and collaborating with communities as being so important for young children.

As already referred to in chapter two it is important to establish a school ethos that works and good teamwork lies at the core of this. This requires the whole school community working together and recognising skills and strengths each member brings to the team. This includes every member of staff, every pupil and every parent having their voice heard. The school ethos can have a huge impact on how teachers view parental involvement and can impact the quality of parents' interaction with schools. A consideration that needs to be made when looking at a school ethos is whether a whole-school approach is being taken to encourage parental involvement. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) found that schools which actively welcome and value parents using a whole school approach are more effective in developing home-school

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relationships than schools that do not appear inviting. The data gathered shows that most of the participants were in agreement about the impact a school ethos can have on parental involvement and were in general agreement that a whole-school approach is important when planning effective parental involvement.

4.4.1 School ethos

The majority of participants noted that because they taught in a DEIS school there was a big emphasis on involving parents. Courses for parents were run in all of the schools and these ranged from parenting classes, gardening, cooking and welcome meetings for parents of new junior infants. Parents were also very involved in running certain initiatives within schools such as Credit Unions, Savings Clubs, Breakfast Club and Homework Clubs. The idea of an ‘open-door policy’ came up many times. However, some teachers referred to the strict policies in place for parents to enter the school including coded doors. Research by O’Toole (2016) found the physical structure of a school can contribute to effective liaison with parents and parental access to the school building was identified as highly valued. Several teachers revealed the infant classrooms in their schools had direct access to the yard meaning parents could drop and collect children at the classroom door which often left opportunities for informal communication. In contrast some schools required the children to line up outside before school which limited the time for communication with parents and possibly sent an unspoken message that parents are not welcome within the school. This could be seen from the data when participants mentioned that the ethos of the school was what influenced the way they built relationships with parents.

I think you definitely learn from the school that you're in so like I would have kind of gauged what way other teachers are doing it in your school and you kind of go with

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that...like obviously if everyone in the school was kind of coming at it at an angle that you wouldn't necessarily go, you wouldn't do that. But from day one of working in this school I realised there's a very kind of laid-back, reciprocal kind of relationship with the teachers and the parents and it was very respectful on both sides and I kind of learned from that.

Of course, the leadership function is crucial in the process of the school ethos. Principals and management teams must believe in, and sell, this ethos to their staff, the local community and parents. Epstein and Sheldon (2016) called for a 'side-by-side' leadership approach in contrast to a top-down approach in schools but did note that the principal was critical in creating a welcoming school environment and prioritising home-school partnerships. The data showed the majority of participants felt their school management was supportive of a school ethos to promote parental involvement. However, one teacher said more could be done and she felt that there didn't seem to be enough of an incentive for parents to be involved in the school. In contrast, one teacher who had started in a new school this school year was surprised at the numbers of parents that attended events in this new school. She said: "I think it's because they know that it's expected of them here. I think in my other school it was kind of like just leave them, people are busy, we'll send out a note and then if they come, they come if they don't, they don't...".

This emphasises the fact that a whole-school approach can impact the teacher's expectations of parents and in turn the level of parental participation.

Most participants reported that staff meetings discussed the topic of parental involvement at various events and in relation to the schools DEIS action plan. Parental attendance at courses and volunteering appeared to be one of the biggest issues discussed. Communication around

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parental involvement appeared to be very task oriented and task led. The data shows that discussions did occur in relation to tasks in the school but other than that there does not appear to be full staff communication, discussion or any process and/or developmental work around it. In one school there was regular structured time given to it on the agenda but in the majority of schools it appeared to be given priority if there was a specific focus such as World Book Day or Grandparents Day.

One teacher noted that discussing parental involvement should be prioritised as she felt that:

You're going to have teachers that are completely against it. You're going to have teachers that are completely for it on a staff and I think it's difficult to get everyone on the same page, but in that sense, it maybe needs to be a priority within the school, and I feel it should be, especially in a school in an area where we teach, where, you know, parental involvement is kind of probably lacking or at a minimum. I feel like it possibly should be driven by leadership within the school....

The majority of participants also appeared unsure as to whether their school had a policy on parental involvement which may indicate the lack of importance schools placed on this topic. None of the schools appeared to have any clear statement of intent in relation to a parental involvement strategy or a clear action plan, both of which would be part of Epstein's (1995) recommendations on securing positive and meaningful involvement.

4.4.2 HSCL and teacher partnership

As discussed in chapter two all DEIS primary schools have access to the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme. Fundamentally, the scheme aims to improve outcomes for students indirectly by focusing directly on prominent adults in their lives (Conaty, 2002). Data

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showed that the role of the HSCL was very valued among all the participants and all noted the importance of the HSCL in linking parents to the school and building parental relationships. The HSCL appeared to be a huge support to teachers in terms of concerns or issues with regards to children and families and all participants felt that the HSCL was always approachable for parents.

So, I think where we're fortunate is that our principal and our home school liaison officer are on the playground every morning at the gate when the children are coming in. So, it's not like someone's trying to poach you it's kind of they're always a familiar face. And sometimes they will approach different parents about different things.

The HSCL was responsible for developing courses with parents and organising courses for parents in the schools such as gardening, cooking, Zumba and parenting classes. They also organised many initiatives in the schools that encouraged parental involvement such as Maths for Fun, Literacy for Fun and attendance drives. A parent's room was also made available by the HSCL in all schools for parents to have breakfasts, coffees and a place to gather. The INTO (1997) recommend that schools which provide effective home-school partnership should provide a designated room for parents.

The HSCL in all schools also appeared to spend time getting infant parents comfortable in the schools. Internationally, low socio-economic status (SES) has been identified as a risk factor in terms of difficult transitions. This transition can not only be difficult for the child but also for the parent. O'Kane (2007) points out that a parent has to adapt to the new role of 'school parent'. "How parents fit into this new role, and the expectations that schools have of them, may also impact on the transition for the child" (O'Kane & Hayes, 2010, p.15). The data showed that the

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majority of the schools had meet and greets with infant parents at the beginning of the school year which would explain the school routine and what to expect in Junior and Senior Infants with regard to curriculum, homework and school policies. Some schools did home visits to all parents of infant children with welcome packs before they started school. Courses were also run in some schools specifically for infant parents such as Chatter Matters, an oral language and communication course, and story sack making that pupils and parents attended together.

Most of the participants noted that they worked in partnership with the HSCL however some noted that the HSCL would organise initiatives and then come to the class teacher to gather names to participate rather than organise the initiative with the teacher. Although the data appears positive it would appear that more could be done to include teachers in the organising through increased collaboration with regard to classroom activities in infant classrooms.

4.5 The early years of primary school

Although many of the participants had taught in a range of class levels most had many years of experience in infant classrooms and the majority of them appeared very passionate about early childhood and the importance of these years in a child's schooling. Many participants were aware that the infant years of education were the foundations of academic success and that positive parental engagement was crucial at this stage (O'Toole et.al., 2019). The data showed that most of the participants had moved away from didactic teaching methods in their infant classrooms and many appeared to incorporate hands-on, active and play-based learning. The majority of participants noted that in order to achieve positive parental engagement during these first two years of primary school that building positive relationships with parents was vital.

4.5.1 Relationships and laying the foundations to education

Life for young children is shaped by relationships. The same can be said for adults as many developmental psychology theorists have emphasised the importance of interactions and relationships including Erikson, Piaget, Bowlby, Ainsworth and Vygotsky. The majority of participants indicated that building a trusting, open and honest relationship with parents, along with being approachable and available to parents was optimal in the infant classes. Research by Hornby and Lafaele (2011), confirms parents can often feel like teachers are seeking superficial relationships. Data showed that participants wanted to make parents feel comfortable in the school and help them especially if it was their first child to attend school. Teachers felt this would set the child up with a good “base” and “foundation” for the rest of their education. All participants noted they have an important role in trying to get parents active in their child’s schooling and keeping parents attitudes positive towards education.

I do think that the children really adopt like a similar persona to their parents in terms of how they see school, whether they do it on purpose or not, you know, it's just kind of that they happen to model the behaviour of their parents. So, I think it's important for me to set it up in a way that their parents are active in their schooling and are also positive about it.

Lucey and Reay (2000) also reiterated the above when they noted that it can be difficult to separate children’s positive and negative expectations of school from those of the adults around them.

One teacher said she would love to see more support given to infant parents in a more solid and practical way.

So that they really feel that they can be active in their children's learning in a more purposeful way. I think sometimes the parents feel lost, that they're not really connected

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closely enough with what goes on in the classroom and with school, and that they probably need a lot more support.

Similarly, another teacher said that some subjects are not taught in the same way as when parents were in school so by building relationships and inviting them into the classroom a clearer understanding of the child's learning can happen.

And you're trying to explain to the parent, this is what I need you to do for the homework. I know they're listening to me, but it's not going in, they don't know what I mean. Whereas I think if they were in my classroom and they saw what phonics was and they played games based on phonics and, you know, it's nearly me.....No that sounds condescending I was going to say it's me teaching them as well.....Like they see it in action. And I think then, and I have had that where they're like, 'oh my God, is that what you mean by phonics?' Whereas if they don't come into the classroom, it's nearly this alien term to them.

One teacher came to the realisation having taught Junior Infants for the first time that it was probably the most important year of school but was worried that parents did not feel the same way. This notion of differing expectations was emphasised by NicCraith and Fay (2008) who found that Irish parents do not understand the importance of play at junior infant level and can sometimes expect children to be able to read and write as soon as they transition to primary school.

What I've really noticed this year, is a lot of parents don't actually rate the importance of junior or senior infants. I think a lot of them think that a lot of the learning doesn't really start until later on.

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She noted that absenteeism was one of the biggest issues she had this year: “I know absenteeism is one of my biggest issues this year. And a lot of it, I think, is to do with parents thinking that actually one or two days here and there isn't making any difference”.

Another teacher stated parental involvement is the first two years was paramount for children who are struggling academically in areas like literacy and numeracy. She said that although we are teaching the basics in junior and senior infants that if a child does not grasp these they can fall behind really quickly. Having an open and honest relationship with a parent when a child is struggling can be extremely beneficial.

So, I think when they're really, really involved and the basics are being taught that's when they kind of need to know because I think if they don't grasp the basics children really fall behind really fast and can struggle really quickly. And I think then it's harder to fix those things, whereas the kind of things we're teaching, it's really not rocket science. I mean, we're doing it in really interesting, fun ways, and it's very easy to explain. ‘OK if you could practice this for five minutes every day, this is really going to benefit your child’

One teacher stated that relationships with parents built in junior and senior infants can last throughout the child's schooling as it's a time when you are really getting to know the child's family. You are seeing the parents on a daily basis and most likely communicating regularly which can lead to long-lasting positive relationships. She said: “Like for the kids in infants, like the teacher is like the whole world you know, you are such an important person in the whole family, like they're constantly talking about you”.

So, kids who I've taught for infants, kids will still come back and visit me who I might have taught fifteen years ago, you know. Because you're such a big part of their lives. So

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definitely it's so important to build relationships there, because those relationships last all the way up.

According to Lasky (2000), a 'string of episodic interactions' is not the same as a relationship that involves a shared meaning and understanding and he stressed teachers must interact with parents as equals in order to build non-superficial relationships.

4.5.2 Aistear and parental involvement

During the processes of developing both Aistear and Síolta the importance of developing relationships with parents, families and the community was identified. Both frameworks acknowledge the importance of these relationships to children and also see them as a key element of effective practice (Murphy, 2015). Although not compulsory in schools' the data showed that most of the participants had completed formal Aistear training and that all teachers were using Aistear daily in the classroom whether they had completed training or not. Some had a designated Aistear time during the day while others incorporated it throughout the day. Significantly, all teachers used theme planning and based their stations on the over-arching theme for the fortnight/month.

The Practice Guides for Aistear and Síolta (NCCA, 2015) emphasise building partnerships between parents and early years educators as one of its key pillars. A significant component of the Aistear guide is the suggestions for sharing children's learning with parents. When asked if parents were involved in the implementation of Aistear in their classroom the majority of the participants said they were not. Some teachers said they inform the parents about the theme for Aistear through Class Dojo, class newsletters or homework sheets and suggest that the parents could discuss the theme at home or they type out questions that parents could ask their children

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about the theme. Others mentioned that they sometimes ask parents or thought about asking parents to send in resources or toys connected to the theme if they have them available.

I did actually mean to communicate with them to see if they wanted to, you know, if they wanted to get rid of anything to send it in. But that was kind of the only way that I was going to try and maybe include them in it which isn't really including them in it it's just asking for resources. But no, I don't include parents in it.

Some parents were informed of their children's learning through photos and pictures that were posted to school apps or classroom blogs. Teachers noted that feedback from parents was positive when they would see the children playing in photographs as children did not always tell their parents what they did in school. Data showed that some of the participants were following some of the Aistear guidelines for building partnerships with parents without knowing it. Another teacher made sure to be available to all parents at home time and said that she would tell parents about the Aistear theme and what they were doing through informal chats. One teacher revealed she would connect some of the children's homework to the theme and that parents are invited to visit if they can share anything connected to the theme.

So our last topic was the hairdresser and one of the mam's is a hairdresser and she came in and told the kids about her tools and talked about being a hairdresser and put little plait's in the girls hair and that was kind of a way to introduce the real life person hairdresser and then also bring one of the mummies in.

Interestingly a few teachers commented that they were inspired to include parents a bit more in their implementation of Aistear as the interview continued. One teacher mentioned: "Now that you say it, I'm like it actually would be really nice for them to come and play with them".

Like I think even you saying Aistear there has put it in my mind that wouldn't it be lovely when it comes to the summer months to even bring parents in, or we can have Aistear activities outside, like I think that would be a really nice thing and at that point in the year, the kids are really established in what they do and they could be showing their parents how to play and how we play and how easy it is to learn while playing.

We actually don't, but if I did bring parents in, I would definitely get them to sit be where the art and craft section or the centre is because water and sand play can be quite messy, but the kids absolutely adore it. So, it could become something then that they even do at home.

Some areas of the Aistear guidelines could be explored further by participants such as inviting parents to spend time in the classroom and participate in activities and possibly hold workshops on children's learning and development, for example on learning through play to give parents hands-on experience of some of the activities (NCCA, 2015).

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the detailed findings of the research from the data that was analysed. These findings have been discussed alongside relevant literature. Chapter five provides a short discussion of the findings from chapter four and is followed by a conclusion and recommendations for practice and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**5.1 Introduction**

In recent years understanding children's learning as rooted in the social, cultural and family settings in which it occurs has been highlighted by educational research (Alanen, Brooker & Mayell, 2015). While evidence from the research suggests parental involvement has a positive effect on the academic achievement of students, there is still concern regarding what constitutes effective parental involvement. By examining the perceptions of teachers regarding effective parental involvement, a more unified approach on ways to enrich parent involvement could be established. This would assist families, teachers, schools and members of the community in working together to encourage student participation and academic success.

Telephone interviews facilitated the provision of qualitative data which elicited the views of the participants. This chapter presents a summary of findings and recommendations for future practice and research in this area.

5.2 Summary of findings***5.2.1 Views of parental involvement***

There was unanimous agreement from participants about the importance and benefits of parent involvement for children, parents and schools. This study found that while all participants agreed they lacked formal training in this area, they were still open to parent involvement. Generally, respondents demonstrated a formal understanding of parent involvement which included homework support and attendance at parent teacher meetings. There appeared to be less understanding of what constituted informal involvement. This lack of clarity about both levels of parent involvement is not surprising as even the purpose, nature and methods of working with

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parents are not clearly defined or described in the literature. However, a number of respondents recognise the importance and benefits that can result from their daily conversations with parents and these teachers also supported parent-teacher communication through homework journals, class websites and ClassDojo. A belief that parents lacked interest in being involved was evident from some and this was also reflected in these teachers' individual attitudes and beliefs and sometimes their negative experiences.

Despite the positive statements from some respondents about parental involvement, further probing revealed that in practice parents rarely participated actively in classroom activities unless organised by the HSCL teacher. Many teachers put this down to barriers such as Garda Vetting, confidentiality and parent motivation and ability. Initially there appeared to be little parental involvement with Aistear in the infant classrooms. However, further probing revealed some teachers were following some of the Aistear guidelines for building partnerships by sharing pictures and the Aistear themes which parents could engage with at home with their children.

5.2.2 Training for teachers

The importance of formal training to ensure teachers have the skills, knowledge and positive attitudes needed to involve parents has been highlighted internationally (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hoover-Dempsey et.al., 2002; Kavanagh, Shiel, Gillece & Kiniry, 2015; Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde & Mutton, 2018). All participants in this study had third level qualifications however most noted their training lacked preparation for parental involvement. Shartrand et al. (1997). suggests that 'making changes at pre-service level would reach the greatest number of future teachers and collectively they could significantly raise the quality of home-school partnerships' (p. 10). Many of the participants appeared open to learning and updating their skills in the area of parental involvement through in-service courses. However, none of the participants

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had participated in or come across this type of professional development. Epstein (2013) suggests, teachers may not support initiatives to involve parents if they are unconvinced by the rationale for involvement or are unsure about what it involves. Therefore, the importance and rationale for this training must be identified at a National Level.

5.2.3 *Whole school ethos*

The findings showed most of the participants regarded a whole-school approach as being important in relation to parental involvement. The majority of respondents were unsure if their school had a written policy on parental involvement which reveals this policy has not being given high priority.

The principal's role is crucial in parent involvement, evident when a teacher revealed there didn't appear to be an incentive for parents to be involved in the school. As Epstein and Sheldon (2016) indicated there needs to be a 'side-by-side' leadership approach when building a school ethos. Discussing decisions with staff and parents creates a partnership approach and these findings may highlight the need for specific training for principals in this area.

The structure and layout of the school is important in emphasising how welcome parents may feel in a school. This was evident when one participant stated the school had coded doors and children were dropped to the yard in the morning and were unable to enter the school without this code.

5.2.4 *HSCL and teacher collaboration*

All of the participants complimented the HSCL teacher in their schools and discussed the important role they played in building relationships with parents. The HSCL appeared to play an active part in helping parents get involved especially when children entered Junior Infants. Many

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of the participants related working collaboratively with the HSCL. However, the data also revealed many of the HSCL teachers organised activities independently while the class teacher supplied the names of the children who would benefit from the activity. It would be interesting to investigate this further to reveal the level of collaboration in organizing activities with the class teacher and to check if time is allocated for class teachers and HSCL officers to meet on a regular basis.

5.3 Recommendations for Further Research

This study investigated the under-researched area of teacher perceptions of parental involvement in an Irish context. As schools and teachers work to improve parental involvement, studies such as this may be consulted to gain understanding of perceptions of teachers regarding effective parental involvement. To assist with this challenge, research needs to be expanded to broaden the understanding of parental involvement for teachers, parents, administrators and policy makers. Suggestions for future research include but are not limited to, the following:

- This study provided a snapshot of teacher perceptions of teachers in junior and senior infants regarding parental involvement. A similar study including teachers of 1st-6th class students would provide a broader understanding of teachers' perceptions of parental involvement.
- This study was limited to data from six DEIS primary schools in urban Dublin. Research could be expanded to include more schools in multiple parts of Ireland to gain broader data.
- Although this study focused only on qualitative data, a mixed-methods approach would be beneficial to provide a more in-depth understanding. A study which includes surveys of teachers, parents, students, and administrators could provide a deeper insight to this area.

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- Additional studies could be conducted to examine which strategies are most effective for teachers in increasing levels of parental involvement in DEIS primary schools. It would be beneficial to examine which particular involvement activities has the best influence on student learning and development.
- As this study was focused on DEIS schools the HSCL officer was often referred to in findings. Research to examine the relationships between teachers and HSCL officers and how they work collaboratively would also be beneficial.
- A further area of interest would be examining how parents are included in pre-schools including Early Start and how this inclusion could transition more effectively to junior and senior infants.

5.4 Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this research clearly indicate that nurturing and maintaining effective parental involvement in some DEIS schools can be complex and multi-faceted. Nonetheless, given the positive attitude of teachers towards this area, as indicated in the data, there appears to be considerable scope to increase and improve parental involvement in our DEIS primary schools.

Below are some key recommendations for practice which could be addressed:

- As emphasised by Epstein (2013), it is not enough that teachers know about the importance of parental involvement but that they also learn ‘how to implement research-based practices that will engage their students’ families in ways that contribute to student learning and development’ (p. 115). Initial teacher training courses should include a module on parent involvement in children’s education. This could include strategies on how to motivate parents, how teachers can practically involve parents, communication and

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building relationships and general reflection on the potential benefits and challenges of this work. Providing regular in-service training on parental involvement would raise teachers' awareness and increase their motivation to nurture home-school relationships (Epstein, 2013; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde & Mutton (2018).

- Given that a priority is given to parental involvement at policy and constitutional level (DES, 1991, 2004, 2005; Government of Ireland, 1998; NCCA, 1999, 2009, 2015), the DES need to review the school working day to ensure time is afforded for meaningful parental involvement. Importance needs to be given to parental involvement in day to day activities and schools might need to consider structural and logistical features that may discourage parent involvement (INTO, 1997; O'Toole et. al, 2019).
- Teachers must be aware of the importance of the early years of education and the lasting impact it can have on a child's learning. Teachers need to partake in continuing professional development in the infant years setting and particularly on Aistear and the role attributed to parents in this framework (NCCA, 2015).
- Support and training for principals around leadership in relation to parental involvement. The principal should encourage parental involvement and create a school ethos that is supportive (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016). Epstein (1997) advocates for the formation of an Action Group within schools which is tasked with planning and implementing parent involvement activities and hopefully leading to a school culture that values parent's input.
- For effective parent involvement the DES need to discuss and revise child protection policies with regard to Garda Vetting. The Board of Management and the Principal must support the Parent Association and strive to develop an ethos that supports parental involvement in the school.

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- While much research has been completed on transitions between pre-school and primary school stronger connections need to be built to ensure parents can continue to be as involved in Junior Infants as they may have been in pre-school. This is a key time to build positive relationships with parents. (O’Kane, 2016; O’Kane & Hayes, 2013; Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012; Dockett et.al. 2011, INTO, 2009).

5.5 Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored how teachers’ lived experiences informed their current facilitation of parental involvement in infant classrooms. Valuable insights emerged from the study including teachers’ beliefs that parent support is significant in a child’s education. The study showed teachers strive to develop open and positive communication with their students’ parents. It also found that teachers along with HSCL use school-based programmes and activities to encourage parents to become more active in the school. The study also revealed teachers are influenced by the school ethos and would appreciate more school management support in promoting parental involvement.

Understanding how teachers’ view parental involvement creates awareness of the huge influence teachers possess in this area and how their influence affects relationships between parents, school staff, students, and the community. If teachers rely solely on their own personal experiences without being trained in this area, it may affect the teachers’ motivation for promoting parental involvement which can have a direct effect on children’s education. This indicates the need for teachers to have additional training support in the form of CPD and initial teacher education, as well as the support of the school principal and school culture. This improved knowledge and support could increase teacher self-efficacy and self-confidence which in turn can

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help teachers fulfill their potential in working and advocating for reciprocal parent relationships and student success.

Principals can indicate how important parental involvement is with all stakeholders by making it a core value in a school. As stated in the literature, there is no set formula for parental involvement. Each individual school must take the time to reflect on its current approach and discuss how this could be enhanced. Through the use of self-reflection and evaluation, principals, teachers and parents can mutually determine which approaches are most likely to be effective in creating a long-lasting partnership. By linking with families on an ongoing basis, sharing information with them and developing a trusting relationship, teachers can ensure children develop a secure and solid foundation for learning in their early years of primary school.

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APPENDICES**Appendix A: Information letter for participants**

Dear Teacher,

My name is Katie McDermott and I am a Masters of Early Childhood Education student in Marino Institute of Education. I am currently carrying out a Masters Research Project under the supervision of Dr. Marian Farrelly. The purpose of the study, entitled 'Infant Teachers' Perceptions of Parental Involvement in DEIS schools', is to investigate infant teachers' views, beliefs, feelings and experiences in relation to Parental Involvement.

Teachers who choose to take part in the research will be interviewed on their own. All interview sessions will take about 30-40 minutes and will be audio-recorded (with consent) to help me remember what people say, but no video or photography will be used. It is hoped to conduct interviews during the months of March and April or at the convenience of all involved. The information given by anyone taking part will be anonymous and confidential – this means that no-one else will know who gave the information, no-one else will hear any of the recordings and the recordings will be stored on an encrypted laptop. The only times I would give information to anyone else would be if someone taking part was hurt or was in danger of being hurt.

Taking part in this research is completely voluntary – this means that you can decide not to take part if you don't want to. If you decide to take part but change your mind, you can stop at any time. If you would be willing to help with this research, I would be grateful if you would sign the enclosed consent form to be collected on the day of interviews. If you have any questions or need any further information, you can contact me by phone on xxxxxxxxxxxx or by email at xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.

Regards,

Katie McDermott

Appendix B: Consent form for participants

Consent to take part in research

Research Topic: Infant teachers' beliefs around Parental Involvement.

Researcher: Katie McDermott

- ☐ I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- ☐ I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- ☐ I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- ☐ I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- ☐ I understand that participation involves a 30-40-minute telephone interview which will be audio-recorded and will then be used to gather data.
- ☐ I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- ☐ I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- ☐ I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- ☐ I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- ☐ I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the research dissertation.
- ☐ I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- ☐ I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a locked filing cabinet and an encrypted laptop where only the interviewer will have access until the until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
- ☐ I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.
- ☐ I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

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☐ I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher-Katie McDermott

Email-

Phone-

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

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Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself and your professional career to date?

Probe: How many years have you been teaching?

What class levels have you taught?

What third level institution did you attend for your teacher training?

Have you completed any continuing professional development courses since qualifying as a teacher?

What class are you currently teaching?

2. Did your teacher training course include information on parent involvement in children's education?

Probe: How was that covered?

What were your thoughts on this?

What do you think could have made your training better?

What skills, approaches could you have been exposed to?

Are you aware of or have you taken part in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) that focuses on parental involvement?

If this was available is it something you would be interested in or would you prioritise other CPD?

3. Did your own parents have active involvement in your education?

Probe: If yes, please describe this.

How do you believe your parents contributed to your educational achievement? Can you give some examples?

4. What is your overall view now of parents being involved in their children's education?

Probe: To what degree do you think a parent can influence their child's academic achievement?

What is your experience of parental involvement to date? Good experiences? Bad experiences?

5. Please describe your school's ethos regarding parental involvement, if any?

Probe: Does school management support this ethos?

Are you aware of a school policy on parental involvement?

Are you aware of any practical strategies employed by the school which involves parents coming into the classroom?

6. Can you describe the kind of relationships you have with parents?

Probe: Describe the strategies you use when you communicate with parents.

What about past experience?

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Did you learn from other teachers/staff/HSCL?

7. Have you completed Aistear training?

Probe: Do you incorporate Aistear into your school day? Explain?

Describe how you involve parents in implementing Aistear?

Can you suggest other curriculum areas which could involve parents for example the Primary Oral Language Curriculum? Or other?

What are your feelings on parental involvement in the first two years of primary school?

8. Can you give me some examples of how you actively involve parents in the classroom?

Probe: Some teachers like to have parents come into the classroom and read to children or do group work with them, what do you think of this? Have you ever tried this?

Can you describe in detail how you organised this? If no, why not? Possible barriers to this?

Are you satisfied with the level of parental involvement in your classes to date?

9. Are parents involved in school life in other ways than just the classroom?

Probe: Paired reading? Oral language courses? Attending trips?

10. What in your opinion may be the negative effects of parental involvement?

Probe: Do you think many colleagues/staff members feel like this? Can you explain?

Is parental involvement something you would discuss with other staff members?

11. Some teachers are not very positive about parental involvement; do you see any validity in that?

12. What does HSCL do to encourage parental involvement in your school?

Probe: How do you work in partnership with HSCL to encourage parental involvement in your classroom? Can you describe this?

13. Is there anything you can share that would provide additional information regarding teachers and parental involvement?

Probe: Is best practice information about parental involvement shared among teachers?

Does the role of parents come up in staff meetings?

What advice would you give teachers who are similarly faced with the task of promoting parental involvement?

Appendix D: Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement

1. Parenting	Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
2. Communicating	Communicate with families about school programmes and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home and design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school progress and children's progress.
3. Volunteering	Improve recruitment, training, activities and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable teachers to work with volunteers who support students and the school.
4. Learning at home	Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting tasks.
5. Decision making	Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organisations, develop parental leaders and representatives.
6. Collaborating with communities	Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organisations, and colleges or universities. Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, family practice and student learning and development.