

The Dynamics of Parental Involvement in an Educate Together National School

Professional Master of Education (P.M.E.)
2014 - 2016

Marino Institute of Education

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Word Count: 10,841

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Submitted to Marino Institute of Education, Dublin 9, Ireland
18th May 2016.

Declaration

This dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute or any other Institution or University. It is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Luke Cape

18th May 2016

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor Paula Murphy. Throughout the writing of this dissertation Paula has provided me with invaluable support and guidance. I thank her for her knowledge and patience which helped me in the research and writing of this dissertation.

Secondly, I would like to thank my lecturers in Marino Institute of Education who were involved in the dissertation process, namely Dr. Rory McDaid and Dr. Barbara O'Toole. I thank them for their insightful comments and counsel which directed me towards choosing my research area and questions.

Finally, I would like to thank the friends and family who have supported me throughout the writing of this dissertation. Their support and advice has been indispensable to me over the past seven months.

Abstract

This study is an exploration of the motivations, experiences and desired outcomes of parents taking part in school-based parental involvement programmes at an ethnically diverse DEIS Band 1 Educate Together National School. It focuses on how parents involve themselves in their children's education with the aim of identifying how their involvement practices can inform future school-based initiatives. The study consisted of focus group and semi-structured individual interviews with parents who have been involved in initiatives at the school in the past. The findings from the study highlighted how the school-based initiatives equipped the parents with skills and self-efficacy to support their child's home-based learning, and how it enabled them to develop social and cultural capital by interacting with teachers and other parents. In addition to this, the study revealed that while parents with a low socio-economic status were highly motivated to involve themselves in school-based activities, there was a need for increased parental voice in the planning of activities and initiatives that would better suit the diverse community of parents.

The findings from the study suggest that in order to promote a fully inclusive parental involvement programme at the school, a meaningful consultative process with parents should be followed in order to identify worthwhile initiatives that serve the diverse interests of parents and children. Finally, the study recommends a broadening of the focus of current parental involvement practice to one that builds advocacy and leadership among parents in order to encourage equitable practice and identify parent leaders at the school.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Aim of the Study

This research aims to investigate how parents of children in a designated disadvantaged (DEIS Band 1) Educate Together National School involve themselves in their children's education. It also seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of current school-based parental involvement (PI) initiatives in increasing parents' participation. Particular attention will be given to the motivations, experiences and desired outcomes of parents who have taken part in school-based PI initiatives in order to identify how they define good PI practice at home and at school. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005, see Appendix 1) model of PI will provide the framework for analysing parents' personal motivations, their response to school invitations and the impact of life contexts on their level of involvement.

Overall, the aim of the research is to investigate which type of PI initiatives could best match the parental body of this school by facilitating the most positive outcomes for themselves and their children.

1.2 Background of the Study

Northfields Educate Together National School is a large co-educational primary school in a growing suburb in Dublin with a population demographic that has diversified rapidly in recent years. Ethnic minorities represent a large majority (87%) of the parental body (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2014) and certain school-led initiatives have been organised by the Home, School, Community Liaison (HSCL) Officer in an effort to develop PI at the school in question. Examples of these initiatives include a

Parent's Council, 'Learning for Fun' (parents and children classes), English classes for parents, IT, sewing and FETAC accredited courses.

So far, the 'Learning for Fun' classes have been well attended by parents. However this year, initiatives such as parent education classes and community events have been less well attended and the Parents' Council has had difficulty attracting members. Another challenge is that the growing enrolment at the school has forced the reassignment of what was the Family Room in previous years (an area for coffee mornings and community events) to become a third junior infants classroom. This has impacted the school by removing an area which had been set aside specifically for home-school initiatives. In previous years, these had included coffee mornings, parent education classes and school-based PI initiatives.

1.3 Relevance of the Study

Studies have shown that participation in parent education programmes have strengthened the role beliefs and involvement of parents (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; De Gaetano, 2007), and that teacher invitations to join school programmes were the strongest predictor of home and school-based involvement among parents (Hoover- Dempsey et al., 2005; Murphy, 2014). However in ethnically diverse designated disadvantaged schools such as Northfields, research has found that PI initiatives tend to focus on 'intervention' style involvement, aimed at school completion and developing home-school links, rather than initiatives that involve parents in planning and directing activities (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). There may be a need for research in order to 'redefine' PI from school-based definitions such as the one above to one that aims to develop collaborative and relevant roles for parents in these schools (Bower & Griffin, 2011).

Educate Together schools regard PI as being integral to their educational practice, citing the democratic involvement of parents as having an active role in the day-to-day running of the school (Educate Together, 2004). However, in areas of rapidly changing populations such as Northfields, involving parents from diverse backgrounds in school life may be hampered by many factors, such as the limited awareness among Irish teachers of issues of cultural diversity (Haverty, 2015) and the concurrent demands placed on teachers to be inclusive of the multiple needs of a diverse group of parents and pupils (Burke, 2004). Research is needed in order to investigate whether the types of initiatives in place in the school are compatible with the interests of the parental and student body, or whether they exhibit a “schoolcentric” vision of PI (Lawson, 2003, p.126).

Finally, Ireland has experienced a rapidly diversifying demographic makeup as well as a growing population in recent years (Central Statistics Office, 2011). This is particularly true in the greater Dublin area, where many schools are oversubscribed, resulting in the children of minority parents often being unable to enrol their children in a local school due to selective enrolment policies (Holland, 2015). Enrolment policies may put ethnic minority parents at a disadvantage in terms of accessing local schools on the grounds of their religion or other enrolment issues such as priority being given to children who have a sibling already enrolled at the school. As a response to this, recent government policy has focused on opening new multi-denominational schools to better serve the needs of a diverse local population than existing Catholic schools. The government aims to increase the provision of such schools in the state to 400 by 2030 (Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO), 2016). However, the opening of new schools in diversifying urban areas has led to the creation of ‘immigrant schools’, as non-Catholic children of immigrants enrol in the multi-denominational school sector while white, Catholic, Irish

children continue to enrol in the established Catholic ethos schools (Devine, 2013). In the future, these schools will face great challenges in providing for a diverse parent and pupil population unless equitable and inclusive PI policies are identified to best serve their needs.

1.4 Research Questions

I aim to draw on Bourdieu's (1986) research into the forms of cultural and social capital while framing my research using Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (2005) revised theoretical model of the PI process (see Appendix 1). Using these and other relevant areas of research, I aim to explore the following questions:

1. What are the motivators to partake in school based PI initiatives?
2. What are parent's experiences of school based PI?
3. What are parent's desired outcomes for their children from these initiatives?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Overview

Research has found that PI improves student participation, behaviour, confidence and achievement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The Educate Together charter commits itself to developing inclusive PI policy: schools shall be “Democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school” (Educate Together, 2004, p.2). However, research has found that parents from a minority ethnic background in Ireland are more likely to experience barriers to their school-based involvement (Darmody & McCoy, 2011) and therefore reduced levels of participation (Murphy, 2014).

Ireland has undergone large demographic changes since the Celtic Tiger boom of the mid 1990s (Devine, 2013). Census data reveals that there were 544,357 people from an ethnic minority background living in the state in 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2012), and that the proportion of children from a non-Irish background in primary schools stands at 11.1%, according to the most recently available statistical data (DES, 2014).

Given this context and previous research, analysing the involvement of ethnic minority parents in their children’s schooling and examining ways which schools can best promote PI of these parents in a diverse, DEIS Band 1 environment is a matter of importance today.

2.2 What is Parental Involvement?

2.2.1 Academic Definitions of Parental Involvement

PI has been described as “a comprehensive set of multilevel and concurrent activities that seek the broad participation of parents in the life and work of schools” (Giles, 2006, p.

258). However, a weakness of this definition is that it does not take into account home-based PI, which has been shown to be an important factor in parental interaction in their child's education (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2011). To this end Smit, Driessen, Sluiter and Slegers (2007) instead used the terms Participation (in school) and Involvement (at home) to differentiate between school-based and home-based activities. Crozier (2000) is critical of such a simplistic view of PI, contending that it is a multi-faceted and complex business, interpreted differently by different constituents and serving a variety of purposes at different times.

Research has shown that school personnel often define PI in school-based terms, while parents' greater involvement in home-based activities to support their children's learning gets overlooked (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). In addition to this, Hanafin & Lynch (2002) argue that school invitations to participate differ depending on the parents' socio-economic status (SES): working-class parents are "targeted" with early start programmes and early school-leaving interventions, while parents from a higher SES are invited to partake in parents' representative bodies and councils (p.35).

Teachers tend to frame PI in terms of their own perspectives and value positions, which can serve to marginalise parents who come from different backgrounds and cultures to their own (Crozier, 1999). The use of the word 'involvement' by schools also needs to be scrutinized, as it can obscure "ornamental involvement", where schools have many parents involved in the school with very little dialogue or learning by either parents or staff taking place (Burke, 2004, p.8).

2.2.2 Parents' Definitions of Parental Involvement

Several studies have highlighted the difference in interpretation of PI between parents and teachers (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Crozier, 1999; De Gaetano, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006). De Gaetano (2007) found that while Latino families in the U.S. tend to respect the role of the teacher and are therefore less likely to contact the school, this has been interpreted by teachers as a lack of involvement rather than an act of deference. Many parents like this who are seen by schools as uninvolved are in fact involved, but in ways that schools may not notice or recognize (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Evidence suggests that parents from different backgrounds exhibit different types of involvement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Minority ethnic families are more inclined to be actively engaged in supporting their children's learning at home rather than becoming involved at school (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2011; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Bower & Griffin, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006), while majority ethnic, middle-class parents are more likely to find active roles for themselves in the schools (Levine-Rasky, 2009). Crozier's (1999) study of parents who come from a low SES background found that they tend to view the school as separate from their everyday lives, and that to them the parent-teacher role comprises a "division of labour" between home-based involvement (parents) and school-based learning (teachers) (p.315).

2.2.3 Models for Parental Involvement Practice

In an effort to marry the differing interpretations of PI, Epstein (2013) suggests interpreting them as "overlapping spheres of influence" of schools, families and communities. In her model, educators need to look beyond PI, as it places the focus on the

parent, and away from the school. She prefers the term “School, Family and Community Partnerships”, as this puts more emphasis on the broad participation of members of the wider school community. However, this model has been criticised by defining the role of parents in the decision-making process from within the existing framework of the school, which ensures that “parental involvement is defined and evaluated in the school’s terms rather than the families’ terms” (Bower & Griffin, 2011, p.78). They suggest redefining PI from purely academic roles toward more collaborative and culturally relevant roles, which could “create ownership” and develop “natural parent leaders”, thus balancing the power between the parents and the school (p.85).

Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, Dallaire, Wilkins & Walker (2005) designed a theoretical model for PI (see also: Appendix 1), which groups psychological contributors to PI into five levels. Level one focuses on personal motivators for parents to be involved, invitations to involvement and the specific life contexts of the parents. It also focuses on the different types of involvement: at home, communication with school, involvement at school, and values and goals of parents. Levels two, three, four and five focus on parental mechanisms of involvement, how this is perceived by the child, and how this attributes to student achievement. This research will use the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler model’s first level of PI as a theoretical framework, as it provides a guide for analysing research in the different areas of PI relevant to the case study.

2.3 Why Parental Involvement?

2.3.1 Academic Benefits for Children

PI has been positively linked to indicators of student achievement, better participation rates, student sense of personal efficacy, as well as adaptive school behavior, engagement in schoolwork, and beliefs about the importance of schoolwork (Hoover-

Dempsey et al., 2005). Of the different types of PI identified in the previous section, school-based involvement has been shown to demonstrate the strongest association with student's educational achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). This type of involvement is exhibited most often by parents from dominant, middle-class cultural groups (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Murphy, 2014). However, among parents with a low SES, involvement in a parent-teacher organisation has been found to be significantly associated with student achievement (Desimone, 1999).

2.3.2 Benefits to Parents and Family

From a parent's perspective, research has found that participation in a parent education programme within the school has improved parents' motivations to become involved in their child's education (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; De Gaetano, 2007). Studies have shown that programmes such as these increase parents' skills and leadership (Higgins, 2007; Epstein, 2001) as well as increasing their sense of efficacy in supporting their child's learning (Higgins, 2007). Incorporating culturally relevant PI strategies such as parent-organised events into schooling has also been shown to be effective in developing relationships and building advocacy among parents from ethnic-minority, low-income backgrounds (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Desimone, 1999).

2.3.3 Benefits to Teachers and Schools

Educational programmes such as language classes that build up a good reputation among parents have been found to promote interaction between parents and the school (Darmody & McCoy, 2011) while developing meaningful skills for the parents (De Gaetano, 2007). For teachers, greater impressions of similarity between self and others

have been reported among teachers in schools with stronger PI practices (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). For the school overall, PI initiatives such as having an open ‘family room’ have enabled improvements in school climate by bringing together the spheres of the families, communities and schools (Higgins, 2007). Desimone (1999) found that PI is a desirable policy for schools as it is “an efficient social investment with a payoff far greater than its costs” (p.12) that addresses considerations of equity and equal opportunity in the school.

2.4 What Motivates Parents to Get Involved?

2.4.1 General Motivators

Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) researched the motivators behind parents becoming involved in their child’s schooling. They identified three causes: parents’ motivational beliefs (how parents see their own roles, and their sense of efficacy in helping their child succeed in school), invitations to involvement at the school and parents’ own life contexts. Further research revealed that specific invitations to involvement from teachers played the most important role in shaping parents’ involvement behaviours (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2011).

Gonzalez et al. (2013) found that in order to get involved, parents must believe that school-based involvement is important, and will make a positive contribution to their children’s success. However, it has been acknowledged that parents’ motivational beliefs differ according to their social background (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Chrispeels and Rivero (2001), for example, found that immigrant Latino parents in the U.S. had different ideas about their appropriate roles in their children’s education than majority ethnic parents, and this affected how they interpreted school invitations to involvement. This

shows that there is a need to analyse research on PI motivators with consideration to the different backgrounds of the parents.

2.4.2 Considerations for Culture and Ethnicity

While specific invitations to school involvement are seen to be a robust predictor of PI, general invitations to involvement from the school do not predict home-based or school-based involvement among ethnic minority parents (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2011). In a case study conducted in Ireland, a general invitation PI initiative that involved culturally sensitive material was the only one that was well attended, among many others (Murphy, 2014). In a study conducted with Latino parents in the United States it was found that in order to become active in schools, parents need to view involvement as their responsibility, not as a task directed by the school personnel (Gonzalez et al., 2013). This research would suggest that culturally relevant, partnership-focused PI initiatives would predict better school-based involvement among parents from minority backgrounds.

Further research with African American fathers (Abel, 2012) and Muslim parents in Holland (Smit, Driessen, Sluiter & Slegers, 2007) has suggested that parental role construction influences whether or not parents will engage in school-based PI activities. This indicates that culturally relevant PI initiatives developed in tandem with parents may improve PI among these parents.

On the other hand, parents whose culture is congruent with the school's demonstrate the most frequent school-based involvement, in response to general invitations (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In order to develop PI initiatives that appeal to all cultures, Bower & Griffin (2011) suggest working to develop collaborative roles among parents, such as parent support groups or presenters in classroom cultural enrichment activities. This would

help increase motivation for involvement by “empowering parents to serve as supports for each other” (p.85), thus empowering them to have a more active role in the education of their children.

2.4.3 Considerations for Low Socio-economic Status

Families from lower SES backgrounds have been found to expend considerable effort to gain the recognition of school personnel as full partners in the education of their children (Freeman, 2010). Indeed, the research found that these parents aim to “break the stereotypical role” that teachers have regarding working class children by “continuously intervening” on their behalf (p.187). Schools that have given this recognition by establishing a “welcoming and nurturing environment” have experienced increased PI from parents with a lower SES (Higgins, 2007, p.115). Another consideration for the motivation of parents from low SES backgrounds is that they may see their involvement roles as separate from the school (Crozier, 1999), and may lack confidence in their interactions with the education system (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

To bridge this gap in understanding, Higgins (2007) suggests developing parental education programmes with an appropriate pedagogy that develops friendship and solidarity among learners, while instigating mutual respect and collaboration between teachers and parents.

2.5 Parental Involvement and Capitals

2.5.1 The Role of the Education System

...it [education] is in fact one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a *social* gift treated as a *natural* one. (Bourdieu, 1974, p.32)

Bourdieu (1986) presents a theory that individuals make use of cultural and social capital to advance and reinforce their standing in society. Cultural capital consists of acquired knowledge of the dominant culture, and “skills and dispositions necessary to succeed in that context” (Darmody & McCoy, 2011, p.147). This cultural capital is embedded in children’s knowledge, language and mannerisms; namely, in what Bourdieu (1986) calls their habitus. By socialising children into the dominant culture, the education system sanctions the “hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.85). Cultural capital in this way becomes determinant in the reproduction of social structures. In a multicultural environment, this “monocultural” system of education serves to enfranchise those with an abundance of cultural capital, while disenfranchising those who are lacking (De Gaetano, 2007, p.148). In this section, this review will explore research pertaining to cultural and social capital and its influence on the PI of parents from different cultural backgrounds.

2.5.2 Inclusion and Exclusion

Research has shown that ethnic minority children struggle to succeed in the education system due to a deficiency of incorporated cultural capital (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1995). Developing language proficiency has been identified as a vital precursor to “unlocking the currency of cultural capital” both for parents and pupils (Darmody & McCoy, 2011, p.159), and as such parents and pupils from backgrounds different from the majority culture may experience marginalisation (Bourdieu, 1986). However, ethnic minority communities, rich in their own social and cultural capital, provide a site for the transmission of values through habitus (Devine, 2009). Parents

activate capitals through social groups and share information about schools and services, while ensuring the reproduction of cultural norms by bringing their children to attend cultural events (Devine, 2009). What emerges is a system of in/out group membership among parents and children from ethnic minorities.

By recognition of either membership of one group or exclusion from another, people “reaffirm the limits of the group, i.e. the limits beyond which the constitutive exchange... cannot take place” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.89). It has been acknowledged however, that predictors of group inclusion or exclusion may not be determined by having “a more or less one-dimensional cultural capital”, but rather having the types of cultural capital that yields the highest return in a given environment (eg. taking part in extra-curricular activities yields greater benefits for children in a low and medium SES environment than in a high SES environment) (Jaeger, 2011, p.295).

2.5.3 Preserving and Protecting Capital

Parents of the dominant cultural group use their habitus and cultural and social capital to achieve positions of advantage in their interactions with the school, in stark contrast to parents outside of this group (Levine-Rasky, 2009). The cultural capital possessed by the dominant group magnifies the effects of PI on their children’s achievement at school (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Levine-Rasky’s (2009) research with cultural-majority parents in a multicultural school also found that these parents may “have a knack for ‘working the system’” which parents from outside the majority culture would not have (p.335):

‘I volunteered to be in the school not for me, but for them [her children] – for all the teachers to know who I was ‘cause if they knew who I was, then by extension they would know who my children were. And if they knew who my children were then I felt that my children would be looked after better or would

be recognized better or would get more opportunities.’ (parent quoted in Levine-Rasky, 2009, p. 335)

Parents may use their capital advantage as a means to an end by promoting their child’s school achievement through their own knowledge gained by experience of the system and visits to the school (Coleman, 1988). This serves to reinforce and replicate the cultural capital endowed on the dominant cultural group (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

2.5.4 Which Capitals are Recognised in Schools?

According to Bourdieu, a teacher’s teachings are always directed by the institution: “pedagogic action must, by an apparent paradox, obtain the recognition of its authority in and through the performance of the work of inculcation” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 124). This has been confirmed in research conducted into PI initiatives in Dutch primary schools: it was found that in many schools with large proportions of minority ethnic parents, the initiatives focused on “improved preparation of the parents” for the school career of the pupils, while in non-minority schools the main objective was for having the parents contribute to the running of the school (Smit, Driessen, Sluiter & Slegers, 2007, p. 48). This study and others show how institutions work to perpetuate dominant types of cultural and social capital, while neglecting non-dominant types.

In Devine’s (2009) study of migrant parent and children’s ability to mobilise capitals in Irish schools, she found that children who were rich in social capital within their own ethnic communities (in-group) chose to partake in activities that accumulated ‘Irish’ social capital, as these activities created “a form of symbolic capital that signified their ‘Irishness’ and willingness to be the same” (p.528). This reflected the conviction among children that their ethnic identities had little exchange value in the Irish classroom, and

confirms Bourdieu's theory that capital is only acquired through "unceasing effort at sociability in which recognition is affirmed and reaffirmed" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.90).

2.6 Barriers to Parental Involvement

2.6.1 Barriers due to Culture or Socio-economic Status

Possible barriers to PI are particularly relevant to my investigation in a school where the majority of the parent population comes from a low SES, ethnic minority background. Studies have found that working class parents feel and are treated by teachers as less valuable than parents of the professional classes (Bennett, 2015). Crozier (1999) reported a perceived gap among parents between their roles and the role of teachers in the school:

'They've [the teachers] got their job to do, a parent has their job to do, and yes, we do meet in the middle or we do meet and say, "Look what's going on here?" or "This is good", you know.' (parent quoted in Crozier, 1999, p.319)

Parents with a lower SES may not feel comfortable in the school building itself (Darmody & McCoy, 2011) or may find it difficult to alter long working hours to attend school events (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Bower & Griffin (2011) identified bridging the cultural gap between 'middle-class' schools and 'working class' families as the biggest challenge to PI among parents from a low SES or minority background. They suggested empowering parents for advocacy by establishing parent leaders within the school as one way to overcome this barrier.

2.6.2 Institutional barriers

Numerous studies have found that where a language barrier exists between the parents and school staff, school-based PI is reduced (Cummins, 2000; Darmody & McCoy, 2011; De Gaetano, 2007; Murphy, 2014). However, school's tendency to assume that

parents are not likely to be involved because they lack the requisite language ability has itself been found to be a barrier to PI (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Teachers may interact less with parents from a minority ethnic background due to their preconception that a language barrier may exist, even when it does not.

From a teacher's perspective, there are few opportunities for in-service support in developing collaborative, family responsive involvement practices within the school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Because of this, within Ireland the approach to cultural diversity has predominantly been left to the individual teacher, who may vary in their level of personal commitment (Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013). Research conducted in the United Kingdom found that teachers emphasised 'integration' of newly arrived pupils into the dominant culture, which involved "conformity and control" of "other" cultures, rather than sharing cultures and values (Crozier & Davies, 2008, p.298).

Teachers tend to employ the same strategies to involve *all* parents, thereby ignoring the different values, needs and experiences of parents from different backgrounds (Crozier, 1999). Crozier (1999) claims that the endeavour to involve parents in this way is "coterminous with achieving the 'ideal type' of parents" (p.327). She asserts that teachers who attempt to reach an 'ideal parent' through their PI initiatives will inevitably turn to parents who match their own perspectives and value positions, thereby doing nothing to encourage the greater participation of marginalised parents. This reaffirms Bourdieu's (1986) theory of a cultural capital that is embedded in society by being "affirmed and reaffirmed", particularly by institutions of education and their agents (p.90).

Finally, Irish research has indicated that teachers may feel a perceived threat to their professionalism by developing inclusive PI initiatives in their teaching (Bennett, 2015). This may be created by being reluctant to share pedagogical methods with 'unqualified'

parents, or they may feel it is impossible to be accountable for the multiplicity of needs posed by dealing with parents as well as children (Burke, 2004).

All, or some, of these facets of the broad spectrum of PI may hinder school initiatives to include parents in the home or school-based learning of their children. By developing PI initiatives that do not take into account diversity and difference among the parental body, schools risk only servicing part of the community, thus maintaining the status quo of cultural capital transfer of the dominant cultural group and further alienation of marginalised parents.

Chapter 3: Research Design

3.1 Introduction

This research project explored the experiences and dynamics of PI at Northfields Educate Together National School through focus group interviews and semi-structured individual interviews. This qualitative approach to gathering data focuses on “the subjective world of human experience” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p.17).

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

The school where this case study was conducted is a diverse school, with 87% of the parental body coming from an ethnic minority background (DES, 2014). In conducting research into human experiences of ethnic minority parents in particular, the theoretical approach and interpretation of findings reflected a critical multicultural perspective. This perspective aims to develop critical consciousness and “equitable educational practice” (Lea, 2010, p.34), as a response to hegemonic narratives that serve to perpetuate “dominant values and common culture” in educational research (Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013, p.479). Acknowledgement of cultural differences in PI can only be useful to this research project if it is accompanied by a critical assessment of the inequalities that may exist between majority and minority ethnic parents at the school.

In order to guide the data analysis, the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (2005, see Appendix 1) model of PI was used, which helped to frame the analysis of parent’s responses and experiences and guide the further discussion of the findings. The themes that emerged from the coding process will be analysed in the next chapter.

3.2.2 The Case Study

Sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases - not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something! (Eysenck, 1976, p.9)

In choosing the case study as the research approach, this project aimed to learn as much as possible from the group of parents interviewed. By focusing on this one instance of the issue being researched, the case study can help to identify how the many different players and processes in the school affect one another. In this respect, this research was “‘holistic’, rather than dealing with ‘isolated factors’” (Denscombe, 2010, p.53).

Another characteristic of case studies is that they are conducted in a natural setting. This setting should exist “prior to the research project and will exist after the project is completed” (Denscombe, 2010, p.56). This natural setting is more conducive to the gathering of information on experiences, relationships and processes as the research is viewed by the participants as “the scene for a social interaction rather than a simple tool for collection of “data”.” (Alvesson, 2003, p.169).

The selection of the case study setting is important. Denscombe (2010) notes that “although each case is in some respects unique, it is also a single example of a broader class of things” (p.60). In order to be able to generalise from the results of a case study, it is important to choose a case that is either typical to the research area in question, or is an extreme case (Denscombe, 2010). In the case of Northfields Educate Together National School, it is in the extreme instance of parental body demographics: 87% of the parents come from an ethnic minority background (DES, 2014).

3.2.3 Interviews

Interviews lend themselves to the collection of data based on opinions, feelings and

experiences (Denscombe, 2010), which is suitable for this case study research into the dynamics of PI. In order to maximise the findings, focus group interviews were chosen as a method of gathering data. Emphasis was placed on the interaction within the group as a means of eliciting information. The aim of this method of gathering data is that it can “yield a collective rather than an individual view” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 436) which can help to form coherent results for further discussion. In addition to this, the researcher’s role in the process was to facilitate discussion, so that “the participants’ rather than the researcher’s agenda can predominate” (2011, p.436). This provided a natural setting for the participants to have their say in a relaxed environment, and may have produced responses that may not have come forward in individual interviews (Denscombe, 2010).

A bank of questions were prepared for the interviews (see Appendix 5), which were used to stimulate discussion during the interview (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The questions used the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler model of PI (2005, see Appendix 1) as a framework: beginning at level 1, the aim was to question parents on their Role Construction, Sense of Efficacy, response to School Invitations, response to Child Invitations, Knowledge and Skills and Time and Energy. The questions also aimed to answer my research questions for this thesis:

1. What are the motivators to partake in school based PI initiatives?
2. What are parent's experiences of school based PI?
3. What are parent's desired outcomes for their children from these initiatives?

3.3 Sampling

The sample group for this research included parents who had taken part in

‘Learning for Fun’ initiatives at the school in the past. ‘Learning for Fun’ classes aim to invite parents into the classroom to experience subjects such as Maths, English and Baking with their children in a relaxed and fun way. During ‘Maths for Fun’ and ‘English for Fun’, four learning stations are set up in the room, with one parent at each station. Parents lead the group in learning activities, and groups rotate after a short period of time.

In order to get a broad sample of the parents, I distributed thirty invitations to parents who have attended the Learning for Fun initiatives in the past. These included parents from Nigerian, Irish, Algerian, Pakistani, Indian, Moldovan, Filipino and English backgrounds.

The parents - names given as pseudonyms - who took part in the focus group interview were:

Esther- Nigerian	Ciarán- Irish	Tanvi- Indian
Abigail- Nigerian	Anne- Irish	Rebecca- English
Temitope- Nigerian	Brenda- Irish	Veronyka- Moldovan
Kebe- Nigerian	Mahnoor- Pakistani	
Olabisi- Nigerian	Yasmine- Algerian	

The parents who took part in individual, semi-structured interviews were:

Nora- Indian
Patrona- Filipino

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study was approved in advance by the Marino Ethics in Research Committee (MERC). All participants in the study were informed of the purposes of the study, and were subsequently informed that participation was entirely voluntary, with the focus group interview intended to take approximately one hour. They were informed that the information gathered would remain anonymous, including the name of the school,

participants, locations etc. Parents were asked to sign consent forms before the commencement of the interviews and the transcripts produced after the interview were limited to the researcher and thesis supervisor. Additional field notes were treated in the same way, and all audio recordings were stored securely.

3.5 Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of the case study method is *the observer effect* (Denscombe, 2010). There is a possibility that the presence of the researcher over a period of time might lead to those being researched behaving “differently from normal owing to the knowledge that they are ‘under the microscope’ and being observed in some way” (p.63). Alvesson (2003) supports this view, adding that statements participants make could be determined by the situation, i.e. they are related to the “interview context” rather than a specific “experiential reality” (p.169). In addition to this, answers may be “tailored to match what the interviewee suspects is the researcher’s point of view” (p.179). This limitation may be mitigated by using focus groups as a method of gathering data: in a social situation with other parents, the observer effect should be minimised due to the presence of people other than the researcher. However in this study, the presence of the HSCL Officer in the focus group may have augmented *the observer effect* on the group of parents present: it was requested at the last minute that the HSCL Officer attend the focus group in order to gather feedback and ideas on school-based activities from the parents.

Another limitation of the interpretivist approach is that the researcher must admit that they are a human instrument and primary research tool in the data gathering process (Merriam, 1998). The identity and cultural positioning of the researcher will inevitably determine how the data is analysed. Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that although it is

important for the researcher to remain “focusing outward on social and cultural aspects” of the findings, one must also “look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations” (p.739). Being a white, Irish, middle-class researcher may refract how qualitative data gathered from working class, ethnic minority parents is interpreted.

Finally, two focus groups had been arranged, each with five parents having confirmed their attendance. However, as the first focus group was beginning eight more parents (including some who had confirmed their attendance at the second focus group) joined the group, bringing the total to thirteen parents. This could limit the data gathered as it is more difficult to gain a consensus in focus groups that have too many participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) and some parents may not be able to share their views due to the crowded nature of the conversation.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the findings from the interviews with parents which formed the basis of the study. The findings are discussed under the themes that emerged following an in-depth analysis of the data, which followed the procedure outlined in Chapter 3.

Firstly, it is important to note that while analysing the data it became evident that cultural-majority parents dominated the responses during the hour-long focus group interview. Out of a total of 245 responses during the interview, cultural-majority parents made 159 (65%). On average, each cultural-majority parent contributed 16% of the total responses, while cultural-minority parents only contributed 3.5%, which is particularly pertinent given that cultural-majority parents constituted just four out of the thirteen participants. This reflects research by Lee & Bowen (2006) which found that cultural-majority parents' "personal dispositions, attitudes, and knowledge gained from experience" (p.198) would be more translatable in a school context, as they have more confidence in their ability to discuss the inner workings of schools due to their "feel for the game" and recognised cultural capital (Devine, 2009, p.111).

The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the ways parents involve themselves in their child's education at home and in school in order to assess PI practices that could be supported and developed as part of school-based PI initiatives. With a view to finding out why parents seek to involve themselves in their child's education, I will begin by framing my analysis using Level One of the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of PI (Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, Dallaire, Wilkins, & Walker, 2005; see also Appendix 1), which

identifies three contributing factors that motivate parents to get involved in their child's education: the parents' personal motivations (their role construction and self-efficacy), their specific life contexts and invitations to involvement.

4.2 Motivators that Predict Parental Involvement

4.2.1 Personal Motivations

Parents' motivational beliefs predicted the way they approached school staff. Many parents in the study mentioned that getting to know their child's teacher(s) was a primary motivator to become involved in school-based activities:

‘I think that meeting the people that are teaching the child first, and I suppose having a good relationship with them... that would be the first thing that I would do. And then find out, I suppose, what would be my daughter's strengths and what would be her weaknesses, and then try to work on that... that would be what I would do at the start.’ (Brenda)

Some parents mentioned how they would use their relationship with teachers to the advantage of their children in the future, thus making use of acquired social capital to advance their standing with the school (Bourdieu, 1986):

‘As they get older, if you've had a relationship with the teachers, when problems do arise, you've got that relationship and when you go in and talk to the teacher... they respect you, and it makes a difference, you know?’ (English parent: Rebecca)

The parent above aims to cultivate teachers' positive regard for her children in order to have the relationship pay off for her in the future. This mirrors Levine-Rasky's (2009) research with cultural-majority parents in a multicultural school that also found that these parents may be able to work the system to their advantage, a skill that parents from outside the majority culture would not have (p.335).

A parent's sense of self-efficacy influenced their view of the parent-teacher role in their child's education. For cultural-majority parents, a shared role was envisaged as a starting point in the parent-teacher relationship:

'It's definitely about shared information and a relationship that it's always taken positively, not like... "oh we've got to do this" or "we've got to do that"... like a negative view.' (Irish parent: Anne)

For parents from a cultural-minority background, approaches to the school staff tended to be made when they had concerns or there were problems at home or in school. While it is clear that these parents were satisfied with their interactions with staff, it did not appear that they approached staff with the same sense of efficacy as above:

'Maybe you could meet them after the school, maybe if you have any major concern or anything like that you know' (Indian parent: Tanvi)

Previous research has shown that parents such as Tanvi who would approach the school cautiously have been interpreted by school personnel as exhibiting a lack of involvement (Lee & Bowen, 2006), while in fact it has been found that ethnic-minority parents tend to envisage the role of the teacher as separate to their own and are therefore less likely to contact the school (De Gaetano, 2007; Darmody & McCoy, 2011). This perceived parental lack of involvement by teachers is a cultural disconnect, and has been associated with higher teacher ratings of students' academic achievement (Hill & Craft, 2003). As long as teachers are unaware of this cultural difference in PI, these assumptions will continue to be made.

4.2.2 Specific Life Contexts

The research revealed that the life contexts of parents affected their willingness to become involved in school-based PI initiatives. Many of the parents were home-makers or unemployed, and remarked that their life context motivated them to get involved:

‘The reason why I joined on my own was that I want to go out in the morning: I’m bored.’ (Esther)

From some parents’ responses, there was evidence of frustration at their specific life contexts, and school-based PI activities were an outlet for them:

‘It’s good for us as well. Because sometimes we don’t choose to be at home doing nothing, but we have no choice. Because our children come first, and in that way it gives us somewhere to come.’ (Rebecca)

Higgins’ (2007) argues that while negative factors such as poverty and unemployment may place parents in a more marginalised position in terms of resources and insider knowledge, it must not be assumed that these parents have lower aspirations or hopes for their children’s attainment. Indeed, she found that parents involved in a PI programme in an inner-city Limerick school were very motivated to get involved with their children’s school-based learning, as one stated: “I had to work hard... scrubbing out bins and all for her... I swore my three children wouldn’t do that... I always valued education, and I said my children will not go through what I went through.” (p.117).

A significant predictor of PI in school-based activities in this study was the wish to develop social and cultural capital by getting to know other parents (Bourdieu, 1986).

Many parents mentioned the benefits of getting involved with regards to gaining support from other parents:

‘A lot of us haven’t got family around us... Everybody’s come here on their own. So, sometimes it’s very lonely. That’s why you need... you get support and friendship, because sometimes when you’re raising a family on your own and you haven’t got... it’s lonely isn’t it?’ (English parent: Rebecca)

This reflects research conducted by Devine (2009) which found that migrant parents with children attending schools reached out to others in similar situations in order to share information and provide support for each other. It is also supported by research that has shown that parents like Rebecca, a cultural-majority native English speaker who would

have significant cultural capital (language proficiency) when dealing with the school, may be limited by having a lack of social capital (social networks) to draw upon (Darmody & McCoy, 2011). This may differ from parents from a middle-class background, whose cultural and social capital may better match the school. For parents like these, the desire to get involved in school-based PI activities may be focused towards increasing the academic achievement of their child and fostering advantageous relationships with teachers, rather than developing social links and supports among other parents (Levine-Rasky, 2009).

Many cultural-minority parents alluded to the fact that through the social act of meeting other parents, they could increase their cultural capital by sharing “skills and dispositions necessary to succeed” in the context of the Irish schooling system (Darmody & McCoy, 2011, p.147):

‘I’d say, meeting with the parents, and meeting with the teacher, to me it’s... to meet with the new parents, to make new friends, and then you can talk about your child, you can share news or experience with school.’ (Filipino parent: Patrona)

The data clearly conveys that although these parents may be perceived to be marginalised by their specific life contexts, they wished to use the school-based PI activities to help develop links and relationships which could benefit them in developing cultural and social capital. However, it is important to note that although the specific life contexts of the parents in this study enabled them to become involved in initiatives during the school day, these initiatives may not suit the life contexts of middle-class families, as many middle-class parents could be working during school hours. Therefore in this case, unemployment can actually facilitate PI, which is contrary to research conducted with PI among parents from low SES life contexts (Crozier, 2001; Levine-Rasky, 2009).

4.2.3 Invitations to Involvement

In response to invitations to involvement from the school, all parents interviewed mentioned that a central motivating factor to taking part would be their child's response to them being there, confirming Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (2011) findings on the motivators which play the most important role in shaping parents' involvement behaviours:

‘For me, involving... seeing my daughter seeing me there, and just give her something that says “OK, my mum is involved so I am happy to go into school every day because my mummy is helping in my school”, and she can able to see me. That's my reason.’ (Patrona)

However for some parents, in addition to the motivation mentioned above the initiative would have to be beneficial to both parent and child in order for it to be successful:

‘If it's not enjoyable, I'm not coming back. Everybody, so everybody has an enjoyable experience... I need to know that this is a good environment to be in with my child.’ (Anne)

It is clear from this data that parents have varying expectations of PI and have very different criteria on what will draw them in to school-based PI activities. Research conducted by Burke (2004) found that this demand for teachers and schools to cater for a diverse range of parents and their varied motivations made it almost impossible for schools to be “accountable for the multiplicity of needs, to a multiple audience, including children, and to parents (who may not even agree with each other on priorities for their children)” (p.96).

The parents in this study emphasised how they stood out in making an effort to get involved in school-based PI activities:

‘I think they always invite parents to come for the baking. But some parents doesn't turn up. Me, I do come.’ (Esther)

Freeman's (2010) research focused on how parents intentionally present themselves to the school as involved in the education of their children in order to gain a position of

advantage with school personnel, thus improving the opportunities available to their children. Another parent mentioned how she used her position to directly approach school staff:

‘I came straight down. I think I rang Mary [secretary] and said can I come and meet her and Joan [principal] came in straight away and was full attention and literally did what she promised to do straight away. She was great, yeah.’ (Rebecca)

While these quotes show that the parents are responding to a welcoming environment fostered by the school (Higgins, 2007), it may also show a deliberate act of positioning by parents as being involved, by continuously intervening on their child’s behalf to “break the stereotypical role” held by teachers about low SES and cultural minority parents (Freeman, 2010, p.187).

4.3 Experiences of Parental Involvement

4.3.1 Parental Involvement Practices

The parents in this study showed a preference for structured home support of homework as a priority in how they perceived their roles:

‘She's had the routine already: come in the door, sit down and homework. So I sit down beside her and then making sure she's doing the right thing, and then correcting and saying "OK, this is right", making sure that, you know, everything's OK. That is the basic thing.’ (Patrona)

It is evident that the parents valued giving academic support to children in the home.

Although home-based parental help such as this has been found to be positively associated with children’s academic achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006), this type of PI practice is often overlooked by teachers (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Having a good relationship with the teacher was valued above all other things with regards to how parents interacted with the school. This reflects research conducted by Freeman (2010) which found that parents from lower SES backgrounds seek the

recognition of school personnel as full partners in the education of their children. This was highlighted in a comment made by one of the Irish parents:

‘I think you need to know also that your teacher, or whoever you talk with, wishes to engage with you in two way conversation. That needs to be, em, discovered, and out there, you know at the beginning.’ (Anne)

It should be noted here that although all parents in the study shared the common goal of having a good relationship with their child’s teacher, research has shown that teachers will find it easier to ‘connect’ with parents who have the same cultural capital as them (Crozier, 1999). This may result in a more advantageous situation for Anne (quoted above), who would share more cultural capital and knowledge of the Irish education system with the teacher than a parent who would not have the same ‘insider knowledge’.

Parents were generally very satisfied with the welcoming nature of the school staff, particularly teachers. The school has a policy that parents of junior classes can come to the classroom door to collect their children at the end of the day. This encourages parent-teacher discussion. One of the parents, whose child has special educational needs, commented on the positive nature of these interactions:

‘They don't complain about her attitude. You know, some childs have attitudes that... it's not encouraging school. But they're tolerant. And they've changed her.’ (Esther)

All the parents stressed the importance of ongoing communication with the teacher over the school year. This was important to the parents with regards to the academic development of their child, but also in order to develop a balanced relationship with the teacher:

‘You can't improve anything without communicating with each other, between the parents and the teacher. Because if the teacher is not communicating with the parents, they don't know what is going on there.’ (Patrona)

Parental role construction is particularly relevant to this study as it has been shown that schools may overlook parents' greater home-based involvement to support their learning (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2011) and that cultural-minority parents' role construction influences whether or not parents would engage in school-based PI activities (Abel, 2012; Smit, Driessen, Sluiter & Slegers, 2007).

4.3.2 Barriers to School-based Parental Involvement

It is important to note that the parents involved in this study were already involved in school-based initiatives at the school, and as such may not give a balanced view of PI practices among the wider parental body. However, by being involved with the school they may be better placed to evaluate the experiences, relationships and processes at work within the school (Denscombe, 2010). When the discussion turned to possible barriers to PI, the parents interviewed acknowledged that for other parents, the language barrier could be an issue:

‘I think the language communication barrier, and the lack of confidence is the... some people are shy. So I think if we can have interpreter, like somebody who is speaking for the... like some people can not speak the language... So if we have the interpreter for them, they can come along with us... So maybe that would solve the problem.’ (Nigerian parent: Esther)

Here it is notable that Esther highlights the importance of non-English speakers to “come along with us,” by converting their unrecognised cultural capital (native language) into a recognised capital (English). Non-dominant cultural capital is seen to have little exchange value in the Irish education system by cultural-minority parents and children (Devine, 2009), and there seems to be an acceptance of the disconnect between the types of capital required in the different spheres of influence at home and at school for these parents.

A second barrier to becoming involved in school-based PI activities was work commitments. As mentioned previously, most of the participants in this study were either home-makers or unemployed, and thus able to come to interviews organised in the afternoon. However, parents suggested that if school-based activities were organised at a different time, it might better suit others:

‘Well obviously, for the ones who can't work, if there was evenings, I mean I can come in in the day, but we were saying we've got a gym there, and I know it means the staff have to stay in, but how else are parents who work going to ever get involved, how are they ever going to get to know other parents? Also, you know, maybe if some of the clubs are evenings, and I know it's hard for the teachers but...’ (Rebecca)

This highlights the importance of consultation with parents while designing school-based PI initiatives. Previous studies have shown the consultative process has been inadequate in taking in the needs and perspectives of parents on the periphery (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) and may reflect a schoolcentric approach to designing initiatives (Bower & Griffin, 2011). However, teacher’s availability and ability to cater for all parents must be taken into consideration, and in reality it may be impossible to suit the plurality of needs.

4.4 Desired Outcomes of Parental Involvement

4.4.1 Instilling a Value for Education

For many of the parents involved in this study, one of the most important aspects of getting involved in school-based activities was to show to the child that they, as parents, valued education:

‘I think it gives an impression to the child that education is valued by me as well, so you need to value it as well. It is very important for them as well as for... we have to reflect that to the child, through homework and through reading and through the story that we did in the class. That more interests the child when they see the parent involvement as well, you know?’ (Indian parent: Nora)

Research carried out with lower income, cultural-minority parents by Drummond & Stipek (2004) found that parents of primary school aged children valued reading above other subjects, and that their PI increased when given specific invitations to involvement by the teacher. This may suggest that for the parents involved in this study, being involved in the school-based PI initiatives gave them a chance to demonstrate their value of education to their children.

4.4.2 Comfort and Confidence

For some parents, becoming familiar with the learning environment at school was important to reassure and inform them about the educational process:

‘It’s very good because number one I’m happy because he tells me he likes school. And secondly... it gives me confidence that my child is safe where he is.’ (Nigerian parent: Temitope)

Previous research has indicated that parents with a lower SES may not feel comfortable in the school due to the perceived gap between the role of the parent and the role of the school (Darmody & McCoy, 2011). Being invited to come in to the school building and see their child in the classroom has enabled the parent above to overcome this barrier.

Furthermore, ‘comfort’ was a word mentioned by many of the parents as a desired outcome of PI initiatives for both children and parents:

‘They hears their teachers talking and hears about their teachers and they feel the comfort that the parents know their teachers as well.’ (Pakistani parent: Mahnoor)

Cultural-minority parents felt that their being in the school could provide ‘comfort’ to their children who are adapting to a new environment alien to both parent and child. This highlights the need to turn the focus of PI initiatives from making demands of parents to help facilitate the success of the school to a reciprocal demand made of the school to adapt

its own practices to suit a diverse, new community such as Northfields (Bower & Griffin, 2011).

4.4.3 Changing Attitudes, Changing Capitals

For some parents, being involved in a school-based activity increased their skills in aiding the academic development of their child, underpinning research carried out in this area by Epstein (2001) and Higgins (2007) which showed that targeted programmes organised by schools could improve parents' skills and efficacy:

‘I look at the teacher, and the way they teach at times. And I copy some of that: the way, you know, when they talk, and I need the language. You know, they have their language, as a teacher. So I, I steal some of that (laughs).’
(Nigerian parent: Olabisi)

This parent also noted that being involved in a school-based initiative had also changed her PI practice at home, thus developing the “correct” form of cultural capital to best prepare her son for success in the Irish education system (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p.198):

‘I use it. At home. I take some home, with the language and the way... you know, coming from Africa you force some children to read. But they don't need to be forced. Me, I say “Rich, do it!” But I didn't, it's not working. “Oh, you can do it!” Encouragement. When I come in, I learn more than at home.’ (Nigerian parent: Olabisi)

Other parents noted that their school-based involvement brought about a change in attitudes towards schooling in their children. They noted that the child's self-esteem improved as a result of their being with them in the classroom, which directly correlates with Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) research into the benefits of PI: “student motivational and behavioral attributes are particularly important because they are susceptible to direct parent influence” (p.106):

‘It improves the child's self-esteem. I notice that on the few occasions I've come in, he's always so happy to see me. Very happy, and he would have told his friends: “My Mom is coming!”’ (Temitope)

4.4.4 Parental Voice: Suggestions for School-based Parental Involvement Initiatives

For parents of children in 5th and 6th class, the transition to second-level was an area they wanted their children to encounter through school-based PI initiatives. While they acknowledged that ongoing ‘Learning for Fun’ initiatives were beneficial, it was clear that for older children preparing to make the transition to secondary school, a more academically focused programme was desired:

‘We have to think what do they need to work towards, and for fifth and sixth class it is all about going to secondary... parent teacher initiatives have to change over time. It’s not just for fun, and it’s not just exercise, it’s something that’s going to help them in school.’ (Rebecca)

The school in question had organised some information evenings for parents on the upcoming transition to secondary school, but parents agreed that they still felt uninformed about the enrollment process for schools in the area, and felt at a loss as to what to do:

‘It happens to most parents. They don’t know. They just do the forms and they don’t know.’ (Nigerian parent: Kebe)

This quote underpins O’Sullivan’s (2014) research into how recent immigrant parents negotiate the education system in Ireland. It found that “lack of clear guidelines” with regards to enrolment to schools caused “huge confusion and uncertainty” among parents which amounted to “a means of discriminating against certain groups and preventing them from acquiring a place in their preferred school... this highlights institutional racism at its worst.” (p.91). While it is important to note that the school itself was making efforts to assist parents in this regard, it is clear that the system is stacked against parents on the periphery when it comes to the issue of enrolment.

At this stage, parents in the focus group suggested taking on the organisation of transition initiatives themselves, which could be effective in developing relationships and

building advocacy among parents from ethnic-minority, low SES backgrounds (Bower & Griffin, 2011):

‘You could even do a homework club, just for fifth and sixth class. Get them set up for secondary school... it gets them into the groove of studying.’ (Ciarán)

This exemplifies the importance of parental voice in the planning of school-based PI initiatives. By identifying second-level transition as one area that needed to be targeted, parents highlighted an issue that the school may have been aware of had there been more consultation with the school. Furthermore, it highlights the need for a move away from the “traditional definitions of parental involvement” which make demands on the parents to facilitate school-directed activities (Bower & Griffin, 2011, p.78). This approach has been found to be derived from a cultural deficit model of explaining educational failure, as it sees parental deficiencies at the heart of the low achievement of the school (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). The inclusion of parental voice in the planning of initiatives would seek to redress this deficit model, and place parents on a more equal footing in matters that directly affect them, their children, and the success of the school.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This research project set out to analyse the dynamics of PI among parents of children attending a culturally diverse Educate Together National School. The data was reflective of the motivations, experiences and desired outcomes of parents who were involved in school-based PI initiatives at the school.

5.2 Summary of Findings

The findings from the study revealed a correlation between the motivations of parents, responses to invitations from the school and Level 1 of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) model of PI. Specific invitations were found to be the most significant predictor of school-based involvement, which corresponds with Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (2011) research in this area. Parents expressed their desire to demonstrate their value for education to their children by being involved in their school-based learning, and felt that this boosted the self-esteem of their children. The life contexts of the parents at this DEIS band 1 school were a positive indicator of school-based involvement. Parents expressed that their life contexts motivated them to get involved at school and respond to invitations to partake in initiatives. All of the parents in the study acknowledged and indeed emphasised the importance of education, irrespective of their life contexts. They showed a preference for structured support of children's learning at home, supervising children's homework and reading activities, and cited the importance of ongoing communication with the classroom teacher to support this. In this way, the research presents findings that are contrary to cultural deficit and value orientation theories

(Bernstein, 1975; Kluckhohn, 1962) used to shaped PI policies in schools that have been found to be “explicitly classed”, with one strand serving parents marginalised by social class or minority status which comprise interventions and home-school links, and another aimed at all parents that tend to consist of policy-level involvement such as parent representative bodies or boards of management (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002, p.35; see also Smit, Driessen, Sluiter and Slegers, 2007). Although the parents at Northfields would fit the ‘marginalised’ category mentioned above, they did not exhibit a lack of motivation to get involved in their child’s education, despite their life contexts.

Parents in the study showed a desire to develop social and cultural capital by becoming involved in school-based PI activities. The social links they could develop through meeting other parents could be used to either broaden existing knowledge of the school system by becoming familiar with school staff, or acquiring the ‘correct’ form of cultural capital that is required for success in the Irish education system (Devine, 2009). Through these activities, some parents found they could acquire the skills and self-efficacy necessary to help their children to succeed at an Irish school, which non-Irish parents may not possess due to the “hereditary” nature of cultural capital transmission (Bourdieu, 1986, p.85) . In addition to this, parents highlighted developing a relationship with the teacher as a major motivator for becoming involved in school-based PI initiatives. However, whereas some cultural-majority parents envisaged a shared role with teachers in their child’s education, others felt they would only contact the teacher if there was an issue that needed discussing. This supports the argument that cultural-majority groups may gain positions of advantage in a multicultural school by “working the system” (Levine-Rasky, 2009, p.335).

Finally, it was evident from the focus group interview that parents desired a greater voice in the planning of school-based PI initiatives. They felt that existing school-based PI

initiatives could be extended to include a school transition programme, aimed to guide pupils and parents through the complicated and often confusing move to secondary school. This underpins research that found parents who have been involved in school-based activities become more motivated to be directly involved in their child's education (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; De Gaetano, 2007), and bolsters the call for schools to develop collaborative and relevant roles for parents in the planning of PI initiatives (Bower & Griffin, 2011).

5.3 Recommendations

The research has highlighted the benefits of school-based initiatives for parents, as well as children. A more detailed and focused analysis of the benefits and outcomes of parent relationships developed through school-based PI initiatives would go a long way toward increasing our understanding of how family relationships affect learning and thus improve our ability to design programs to facilitate the most positive outcomes for children. Additional research is needed in order to identify meaningful consultative processes that include parental voice in the planning and directing of PI initiatives. Furthermore, future studies should focus on broadening the focus of PI initiatives in disadvantaged schools like Northfields from one of 'intervention' to one that aims to build advocacy and efficacy among parents. Schools that implement initiatives that empower parents to take on leadership roles have been found to increase the participation and impact of existing strategies within the school by increasing ownership, accountability, and social networks among parents (Bower & Griffin, 2011).

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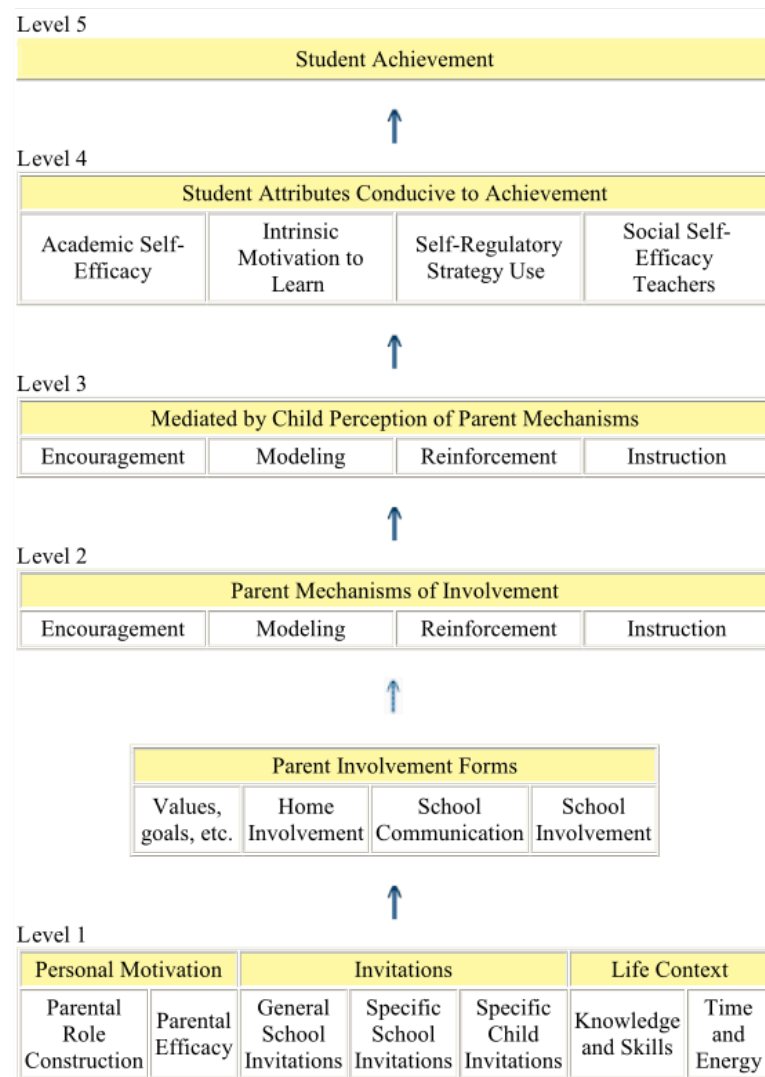
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Appendix 1: Revised Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler theoretical model for PI process

The Model

The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement



Adapted from Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; 2005.

Adapted from Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, Dallaire, Wilkins, & Walker (2005).

Appendix 2: Letter to Board of Management

Marino Institute of Education,
Griffith Avenue,
Dublin 9
6th February 2016

Northfields Educate Together,
Newpark,
Northfields,
County Dublin.

Dear Chairperson,

I am researching “Dynamics of Parental Involvement” as part of my Professional Masters in Education Degree in Marino Institute of Education, Dublin.

I would like to ask for approval to conduct focus group meetings with parents in order to discuss parental involvement in schooling.

These focus group meetings would examine how parents view their roles in relation to their child’s education and what motivates them to get involved. The focus group participants would be parents who are taking part in the ‘Learning for Fun’ classes being co-ordinated by the Home, School, Community Liaison officer.

The aim of this research is to establish ways in which the school management and parents can work together to develop meaningful parental involvement initiatives and enhance children and families’ experience of school at Northfields ETNS.

The proposed focus group meetings and ensuing research will run in full compliance with all school policies and Data Protection and Freedom of Information legislation.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Luke Cape

Lcapepme14@momail.mie.ie

Appendix 3: Letter to Parents involved in ‘Learning for Fun’ classes

Marino Institute of Education,
Griffith Avenue,
Dublin 9
6th February 2016.

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Luke Cape, and I am currently studying for my Professional Masters in Education in Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I am currently on school placement at Northfields Educate Together National School, where I am working with 3rd and 6th class, and developing I.T. resources for the classrooms.

As well as this, I am researching “Dynamics of Parental Involvement” as part of my masters degree, under the supervision of Paula Murphy. I am very interested in finding the best ways for parents and teachers to work together to enhance your child’s learning.

I would like to invite you to participate in a small group interview with other parents to discuss parental involvement at Northfields Educate Together. The aim of the interview is to discuss ways in which the school can support you to become involved in your child’s education.

Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. All information (names, locations etc.) will remain anonymous. If you wish to participate in the study, **please fill in the attached form and return it (by post or to the school office) by Monday, 18th February.** The group interview will be held at 10.00 a.m. on Wednesday 27th February in the “Family Room” at Northfields Educate Together and will last approximately 45 minutes. Light refreshments will be provided.

If you have any questions regarding this research, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your support in this education study.

Yours sincerely,

Luke Cape
(Trainee Teacher)
lcapedme14@momail.mie.ie

I would like to take part in the interview on **Wednesday 27th February at 10am**

Name: _____ Telephone Number: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix 4: Interview Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Focus Group Study as part of Professional Masters in Education (PME) Thesis, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin.

Please
check the
boxes

	The purpose of the group discussion and the nature of the questions have been explained to me.
	I consent to take part in a focus group about my experiences with regard to parental involvement in education. I also consent to an audio recording during the focus group discussion.
	My participation is voluntary. I understand that I am free to leave the group at any time.
	None of my experiences or thoughts will be shared with anyone outside of the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, unless all identifying information is removed first.
	The information that I provide during the focus group will be grouped with answers from other people so that I cannot be identified.

Please print your name

Date

Please sign your name

Witness Signature

Date

Appendix 5: Question bank for Interviews

1. What do you think is the role of a parent in their child's education?
2. What activities do you do to support your child's education at home?
3. What activities do you do to support your child's education at school?
4. What activities are most important to you in terms of your child's education?
5. What do you hope these activities will achieve for you and your child?
6. How often do you communicate with staff in the school?
7. On what occasions do you communicate with staff in the school?
8. What makes it difficult for parents to interact with school staff?
9. If you could improve one thing about parent's and staff's communication, what would it be?
10. Have you been involved in school-based activities eg. Learning for Fun before?
11. Why did you choose to take part in these activities?
12. What are the benefits of the Learning for Fun classes, in your opinion?
13. Do you think the Learning for Fun classes could be improved in any way?
14. Has your opinion of the school changed since joining the Learning for Fun classes?
How?
15. Are there any other school-based activities that you would like to be involved in at the school?
16. What would make you want to become involved in another school based activity?
17. What are the benefits of parents becoming involved in their child's education at school, in your opinion?