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**Making Parental Involvement a Key
Process in Primary Education: An Action
Research Project in a Junior, Primary
School**

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B. Ed**

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university

Signed: Dolores C. Burke May, 2004

Dolores Burke

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction:

This action research project is not simply a methodology of investigation but a process through which, I as a practitioner enquire into my own efforts to improve practice and assert my responsibilities and values.

Findings from one study¹ indicate that the degree and nature of parental involvement differ drastically between schools and within schools. Parents may be involved in many ways. These include the 'silent' encouragement at home of their children's educational activities and the influencing of positive attitudes towards school.

However, a high level of parental involvement does not always indicate positive relationships between parents and educators; sometimes school-community relations are difficult or strained. Levels and types of parent participation in schools is often influenced by whether parents feel a sense of ownership. In addition, the level and nature of parent involvement is context-specific; parent communities differ when, for example, they may share a similar socio-economic and racial background.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study:

There has been a notable shift of focus in the debate on educational disadvantage...away from the social, cultural background of the pupil to the

¹Maike Philipsen, (1996) "Parental Involvement in School: In search for Socially Situated Understanding". Accessed from: <http://www.ericfacility.net/teams/Search.do?action=102>

process of schooling and the role of parents within that process.² In the past the debate focused on a notion of social and cultural deficit among families as 'the problem' to be solved. The focus is now on the process of schooling and parents' role within it. However, Hanafin and Lynch³ concluded that *parents* in their study saw parental involvement in school, both proximal and peripheral, as unsatisfactory. I was aware of the relative impermeability of schools to parental voices and I wanted to examine whether and how I might address the imbalance. As a teacher-parent of primary school-going children, I have experienced and understand school cultures that are promoting school and classroom non-involvement. I wanted to experience at first hand and reflect upon the objections teachers express to having parents in the classroom. I wanted to be in a position to make a judgement as to whether these objections are justified in this context or not.

I also wanted to establish the *principle* of parent-teacher collaboration. I believed that once the parents and I talked and worked together alongside each other for the collective benefit of the children, then, given normal good fortune, the situation would grow and develop naturally.

I agree with Munn⁴ that parental voice (if it is an authentic voice) opens up greater possibilities for school improvement than parental choice.⁵ I wanted to begin a process of engaging parents in meaningful discourse about their

² J. Hanafin and A. Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: Parental Involvement, Social Class, and Educational Disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 23, 2002, No.1.p.36.

³ *Ibid.*p.46.

⁴ Pamela Munn, (ed.) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.173.

⁵ Choosing what you perceive to be the best school for your child will not do anything to improve the effectiveness of that school. It may indeed encourage complacency. An authentic parental voice that is broad and diverse is more likely to help schools improve.

children's education and enlist their help in achieving a better quality experience for them. I wanted to play my part in eroding the mutual suspicion between parents and teachers.

Having reflected with groups of teachers daily⁶ on implementing a revised curriculum, I became convinced that it would be impossible to implement it, to ensure children have quality learning experiences that inspire them and enthuse them in the direction of lifelong learning, without meaningful parental support. The move to take into account different learning styles and eclectic approaches is, in my view, impossible without the private and public support of one of the key groups to which teachers are accountable i.e. parents.

McConkey's⁷ assertion seems relevant:

It is not that staff are actually blocking the involvement of parents, rather in their system they cannot see themselves coping with it. Nor can the fault, if that is the correct word be wholly theirs. It is amazing that the evangelical zeal with which parental involvement has been preached has rarely been matched by practical assistance as to how they could make it a reality within their service.

I wanted to see how it could be made a reality, how well I could cope with it and what kind of effort would be involved. I wanted the parental involvement to be something more meaningful than the giving and receiving of information, the restricted consultation and the engagement in some

⁶ The author spent three years on secondment with the Primary Curriculum Support Programme, facilitating seminars and visiting schools in support of the Revised Primary Curriculum.

⁷ Roy McConkey (1985) in Zita Lysaght, "Partnership with Parents in Primary Education" *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 12, 1993, p. 196.

supplemental responsibilities that can typify what parental involvement has come to mean in many primary schools in Ireland.⁸

I had grand plans. I was going to link parental involvement in the classroom with improvements in literacy, numeracy (achievement patterns, learning behaviours and reading behaviours) and self-esteem. It became clear very early on that this was far too ambitious given the constraints of time and resources! I was aware of the myriad of contributing variables affecting children's educational performance. Even if I had the time and resources, it was going to be extremely difficult, methodologically, to identify parents' engagement with their children as a significant influencing factor in educational improvement.

Wolfendale⁹ conceptualises the parent contribution to children's education as 'value added' as a way of singling out what it is parents contribute 'without having to rely solely on often spurious or misleading statistics'. Hannon, Topping and Wolfendale¹⁰ query the reliance on test scores in measuring this 'value added' dimension. They identify a range of methodological shortcomings in the reliance on test scores as the sole outcome criteria of home-school literacy initiatives. I decided to take a different direction in my research.

⁸ J. Hanafin and A. Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: Parental Involvement, Social Class, and Educational Disadvantage," *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 23, 2002, No. 1.

⁹ Sheila Wolfendale, "Parents as Partners in Research and Evaluation: Methodological and Ethical Issues and Solutions". *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 26, 1999, No. 3, pp.156-61, p.165.

¹⁰ Hannon, K. Topping and S. Wolfendale in Sheila Wolfendale, "Parents as Partners in Research and Evaluation: Methodological and Ethical Issues and Solutions". *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 26, 1999, No. 3, pp.156-61, p.165.

I was aware of Vincent's¹¹ assertion that the cheery, unfailing positive tone that seems *de rigueur* in the recounting of parental involvement projects means that pitfalls, problems or failures get edited out of the 'story' being told and it becomes difficult to get beneath the rhetoric and critically assess projects. I was not going to fall into that trap.

1.3 Rationale:

Mouly¹² writes that research is best conceived as the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. The problem of implementing the revised curriculum, adapting and responding to continuous unplanned and unprecedented change in a positive way in a climate of growing discontent with institutions' inability to be accountable is a real challenge. Cohen and Mannion¹³ have described action research as 'a small scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention.'

I aimed to observe the characteristics of an individual unit i.e. my class and myself, within this school, interacting with parents. The purpose of such observation was to probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the lifecycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which that unit belongs.

¹¹ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996)

¹² G.J. Mouly in Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion, *Research Methods in Education*, (London: Routledge Falmer, 1998) p.29.

¹³ Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion, *Research Methods in Education*, (London: Routledge, 1980) p.174.

The study proposes to:

- strengthen school community ties through a process of parental involvement.
- describe the types of involvement happening in a particular classroom,
- analyse the factors that facilitate or inhibit this involvement.
- identify some consequences of the involvement for the teacher, parent, child and school as an institution.

Parental involvement that happens at home and that involves *attitudes* and a private, quiet, support is not a focus of this study. The focus of this study is the daily, informal, interactions with parents at the door of the classroom, the invited involvement of the volunteer mothers who were in a position to come into the classroom at different times, the formal class meetings and parent-teacher meetings.

1.4 Overview of Study:

Chapter One introduces the research topic, and contextualises it. It clarifies the parameters of the study. The researcher outlines the actual purpose of the study and the background to it. A rationale is presented together with a general overview of the study.

In **Chapter Two**, the extensive, relevant literature is presented and discussed. The trends in relation to the political and educational discourse

on parental involvement are analysed. Parental involvement is not presented as an unmitigated good but as a process that is fraught with difficulty and must be managed.

Chapter Three outlines the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods used, and details the sequence and scope of these methods.

The findings presented and analysed in **Chapter Four** indicate that parental involvement in the classroom can yield many benefits but must be carefully planned and implemented.

In **Chapter Five**, the author presents a brief summary of the findings of this study and among other things, recommends comprehensive in-service for teachers in relation to broad, meaningful classroom involvement.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Parental involvement in education is a term, which is used to describe anything from helping in the school library to accompanying children on school trips. This functional involvement is to be welcomed but, Jowett¹⁴ cautions, cannot substitute for the more deliberate dissemination and discussion of information that will help parents to help their children to learn. Jowett¹⁵ *et al* state:

The use of the word 'involvement' for a range of such activities has served to obscure the key issues. Schools may have a great many parents providing assistance and see this as a thriving system of parental involvement whereas very little dialogue or learning by either parents or staff may be taking place.

They argue that such functional involvement in a school might serve to limit access to information from schools if only those parents who are able and willing to 'service' the school gain insight into the curriculum. Macbeth¹⁶ is critical of what he calls 'trivial and subservient' parental actions being paraded as educational partnership but acknowledges the genuine participatory approaches of Widlake¹⁷ and Wolfendale.¹⁸

¹⁴ S. Jowett, M. Baginsky and M. McDonald-McNeill, *Building Bridges – Parental Involvement in Schools*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1991), p.137.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Alastair Macbeth, "Preconceptions about parents in education" in *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* ed. Pamela Munn (London: Routledge, 1993), p.39.

¹⁷ P. Widlake, *Reducing Educational Disadvantage* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986).

¹⁸ Sheila Wolfendale, *Parental Involvement: Developing Networks between School, Home and Community* (London: Cassell, 1989).

Any discussion must be preceded by an illumination of the term, a mention of the significant policy shifts and historical events shaping the trends of parental involvement or non-involvement.

'Deep and complicated changes have occurred in the ethnic and social composition of many neighbourhoods' wrote Bastiani¹⁹ of Britain in 1989, changes which have occurred latterly in Ireland but with much greater rapidity in less than a generation.²⁰ Ireland's homogeneous society has changed to a heterogeneous one in a very short space of time with significant legislative changes happening simultaneously²¹. Homosexuality has been decriminalised and homosexual partners are choosing to rear families. A lone parent or a cohabiting couple now heads more than a quarter of all family households.²²

According to the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation²³, there is widespread movement to involve parents across all OECD countries. Countries have different reasons for this, arising from values deeply embedded in the political culture. The various reasons given by officials and policy analysts, cited in the report include: democracy, accountability, consumer choice, a lever for raising standards, tackling disadvantage and improving equity, addressing social problems and resources. These, and other notable aspects, will be examined in this chapter.

¹⁹ J. Bastiani, *Working With Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1989)

²⁰ Fitzgerald, G (2003, Sept.6) Traditional Family Life forced to undergo many changes. *The Irish Times*, p.14.

²¹ These include: The Education Act, 1998, The Education Welfare Act, 2000, The Equal Status Act, 2000, Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2003.

²² Fitzgerald, G. (2003, Sept 6) Traditional Family Life forced to undergo many changes. *The Irish Times*, p.14.

²³ Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, *Parents as Partners in Schooling*, (Paris: OECD, 1997) p. 26-27.

2.2 Changing Attitudes in Relation to Parental Involvement:

Jones *et al.* argued in 1992 that parental attitudes in Britain were changing slowly from deference, puzzlement and helplessness towards a general recognition that parents *do* have a formal right to information and access concerning their children's schooling, and to a share in decisions regarding this. Similar trends, it could be said, have become apparent in Ireland, particularly in light of new legislation, and the prevailing political discourse, which has, in effect, placed parents at the centre of the education process.

Bastiani²⁴ stresses how crucial attitudes are to parental involvement. He says that the nature, range and scope of home-school activities are shaped by the underlying attitudes and values of those who implement them.

Vincent's criticism²⁵ of the way in which issues of ethnicity, social class and gender have been over-looked in the existing home-school literature is representative of other changes that are emerging in the home-school discourse. She argues that neglect of these dimensions results in a superficial discussion of ways to enhance home-school relations.

2.3 Securing Meaningful, Diverse Involvement:

In securing meaningful involvement it is worth keeping in mind Macbeth's²⁶ criticism of 'trivial and subservient' involvement and Sarason's assertion that what is important for realizing the spirit of involvement is the degree and

²⁴ John Bastiani, *Working with Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Berkshire: Nfer Nelson, 1989) p.43.

²⁵ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers – Power and Participation* (London: Falmer Press, 1996).

²⁶ Alastair Macbeth, in Pamela Munn, (ed.) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* (London: Routledge, 1993).

quality of the mutual trust and respect characterizing it. Recent literature suggests that meaningful, diverse involvement involves:

- diversity of class and race
- balance of gender
- power-sharing interactions involved in problem solving

These topics are explored overleaf.

2.3.1 *What does Parent Involvement Mean?*

First, Crozier²⁷ states that parent involvement in schools is a multi-faceted and complex business, interpreted differently by different constituents and serving a variety of purposes at different times. The term itself has been criticised by many authors for being unhelpful in its vagueness. Vincent²⁸ is critical of a consensual language surrounding it with words like 'partnership', 'dialogue' and 'sharing' featuring strongly in the home-school literature. The terms suggest, she says, a warm 'community-spirit' scenario, which, if not achieved, could leave the vulnerable partners feeling inadequate and disillusioned and initiatives could collapse.

The use of the term '*Parental* involvement' implies involvement by *both* parents and can be misleading in this context, in that while fathers are undoubtedly involved in some aspects of school life, and can play an important symbolic role, it is the mothers, Jowett²⁹ *et al* remind us, who are

²⁷Crozier (2000) in Hanafin and Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.23, 2002,1, p.10.

²⁸Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.73.

²⁹S. Jowett, M. Baginsky and M. McDonald-McNeill, *Building Bridges – Parental Involvement in Schools*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1991) p.137.

expected to (and do) take the major role. While some are eager to do this and indeed thrive on this contact, it is not a realistic option for all.

Reay³⁰ points out that teachers' and schools' usage of the term 'parent' without any qualification as to *which* parent acts as an invitation: it leaves open the possibility of paternal involvement'. The increasing use of the term 'guardian' acknowledges the changing and often complicated family arrangements that always existed, but were often unrecognised in the past.

Taken together, the literature identifies parents as consumers, collaborators, supporters, advocates for their children, 'teacher-bashers', bureaucracy-busters, participants, partners, culture carriers, problems, solutions and policemen. Vincent and Martin³¹ looked at the operating of two school-based parents' forums at two secondary schools. They asked if such groups could encourage a more vibrant and interactive public conversation concerning state provided welfare services. Both school's attracted a small group of 'elite participationists' with limited concerns who did not connect to the wider parent body within a school. They played a constrained and limited role due, in part, to the 'relative impermeability' of the schools to parental voices. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the parent-type caricatured by Mulcahy³² (Appendix 2) is on the increase in certain schools.

³⁰ Diane Reay, in Hanafin and Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.23, 2002, 1, p.10.

³¹ Vincent and Martin (2000) in Hanafin and Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.23, 2002, 1, pp.474- 475.

³² Mulcahy, Orna, (2004, April, 3) People we know, *The Irish Times Magazine*, p.6 (Appendix 2)

2.3.2 Mothers' work in relation to their children's education:

Hanafin and Lynch³³ highlight the work of many authors who have explored the nature of mothers' work in relation to their children's education and conclude that it is largely invisible. Two studies by Miriam³⁴ demonstrate mothers' critical importance in their children's education at home and at school, with mothers normally investing more time and energy than fathers in child rearing and school associations. O'Brien³⁵ describes and attempts to understand the nature and extent of the emotional work mothers perform. Further analysis reveals issues of resources and inequalities in performing this labour. She identifies mothers' caring efforts as a form of education work per se: a work that takes a particular shape around schooling while also taking into account the individual identities of their children.³⁶

This research suggests that mothers' lives are shaped by caring labour including education work: labours that are largely unseen but that are inalienable, and demanding on their time and energies.

The mothers in her study place a high level of significance on supporting their children's education and perform extensive and intensive efforts to ensure the educational well being of their children. They recognise that they are the 'foot soldiers' and 'donkey workers' of education work: the people who

³³ Hanafin and Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.23, 2002,1, p.10.

³⁴ David Miriam, (1998) "Involvement and Investments in education: Mothers and Schools", *Journal for a Just and Caring Education*. Accessed from: <http://www.ericfacility.net/teams/Search.do?action=102>

³⁵ Maeve O'Brien, "Mothers as Education Workers: Mothers' Emotional Work at their Child's Transfer to Second-Level Education", Presented to the *Educational Studies Association of Ireland Annual Conference*, NUI Maynooth, 1st - 3rd April, 2004.

³⁶ Drawing on twenty-five case studies, O'Brien's research explores in depth both the extent and nature of emotional work in mothers' daily practices. Against that backdrop it identifies the specific emotional work performed at school transfer. It examines mothers' common experiences in shouldering emotional education work and finds that mothers are *key* education workers.

organise, plan and act to ensure their children's educational well being at a time of uncertainty and change.

She suggests that the silence around the demanding nature of care and education work needs to be broken. She agrees with other authors who find the term 'parental involvement' misleading in relation to the extent of this gendered work, as it is clear that mothers are the key workers and fathers, in the main, play a lesser role. O'Brien believes the term 'involvement' is reductionist with respect to this extensive education work, which is shaped by emotional bonds between mother and child, and therefore limitless and inalienable. It cannot be commodified or 'farmed out' to another as paid work. It happens within the context of a caring, intimate relationship and operates within a rationality of care, one that has an emotional dimension.

Edwards and Warin³⁷ point to the lack of recognition of the real role of parents as the child's earliest teachers and as the builders of learning identities on which all learning is based. Further, they suggest that parents are being expected to perform skilled pedagogical tasks for which they are inadequately prepared.

2.3.3 Balance of Gender:

McGrath and Kuriloff³⁸ highlight that mothers' availability for school activities is a major influence on differing levels of involvement. They can only be

³⁷ Anne Edwards, and Jo Warin, "Parental Involvement in raising the Achievement of Primary School Pupils: why bother?" *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 25, 1999, No. 3, pp. 325-341.

³⁸ D. McGrath, and P. Kuriloff, " 'They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place': Upper-Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children" in *Educational Policy*, Vol.13, 1999, pps. 603-629.

involved if they are available to be involved. O'Brien³⁹ found that mothers are rearranging their working lives so that they can be involved. Fathers, similarly, can only be involved if they are available to be involved. An OECD report⁴⁰ acknowledges the particular importance of paternal involvement for young boys who lack strong male role models. Adult men can, by their presence, confirm the importance of what the teacher, (the largest proportion of whom are female) is trying to achieve.

Social class differences in family life also shape family school relations according to Lareau⁴¹ where rigid gender roles adopted by working-class couples mean that those parents would be more likely to see it as the mother's role to be involved in school activities.

I suggest that gender differences and preferences have a part to play also. Fathers may feel they have neither the skill nor the patience to engage in the 'paired reading' but would involve themselves in the drawing of playground markings or installation of shelves or web-site design or computer maintenance. There appears to be a lack of active outreach targeting fathers. In relation to this, Sevenhuijssen⁴² highlights how educational institutions could be playing a role in reproducing gender inequalities at the level of family.

³⁹ Maeve O'Brien, "Mothers as Education Workers: Mothers' Emotional Work at their Child's Transfer to Second-Level Education", Presented to the *Educational Studies Association of Ireland Annual Conference*, NUI Maynooth, 1st - 3rd April, 2004.

⁴⁰ Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, *Parents as Partners in Schooling*, (Paris: OECD, 1997) p. 26-27.

⁴¹ Annette Lareau, *Home advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, (Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989).

⁴² Sevenhuijssen (1998) in Maeve O'Brien "Mothers as Education Workers: Mothers' Emotional Work at their Child's Transfer to Second-Level Education", Presented to the *Educational Studies Association of Ireland Annual Conference*, NUI Maynooth, 1st - 3rd April, 2004.

A parent in Vincent and Martin's⁴³ study was of the view that men get involved at secondary school when the 'stakes get higher'. Interestingly, teachers in Lareau's study⁴⁴ were very impressed by the presence of a father in the school grounds and in some cases it appeared to raise teachers' expectations for academic performance.

2.3.4 Nature of Parental Involvement:

Bastiani⁴⁵ states that there has been 'too much untargeted communication with parents as a single undifferentiated body'. Recent research has focused on differentiating that parent voice where the gendered, classed and 'raced' nature of parental involvement has been explored⁴⁶. Hanafin and Lynch⁴⁷ have described a continuum of involvement ranging from 'proximal' to 'peripheral'. Working-class parents who are perceived to be on the periphery are the focus of interventions such as early start, home-school-community-liaison and early school-leaving interventions. Membership of parents' representative bodies, school boards of management and parent councils are directed at *all* parents. In practice, however, it is middle class parents who are most involved, most visible and therefore proximal to schools.

⁴³ Vincent, C., and Martin, J., "School-based parents' groups—a politics of voice and representation?" *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 15, 2000, No.5, pp. 459-480.

⁴⁴ Annette Lareau, *Home advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, (Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989) p.185.

⁴⁵ John Bastiani, *Working with Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Berkshire: Nfer Nelson, 1989) p.42.

⁴⁶ K. Standing "Lone Mother's Involvement in their children's schooling: Towards a new Typology of Maternal Involvement", *Gender and Education*, Vol.11, 1999, No. 1 and D. Reay (1995) "A Silent Majority? Mothers in Parental Involvement", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 18, pp 337-348.

⁴⁷ Hanafin and Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.23, 2002, 1, p.10.

Lyons *et al*⁴⁸ classifies parents as 'insiders', 'outsiders' and Intermediaries' broadly paralleling the classification of Gewirtz⁴⁹ *et al*. A classic example of an 'insider' is the teacher-parent who attempts to get information on the attainments of his/her child's peers so the standard of the class can be gauged or a parent can judge the progress of his/her own child in relation to the class. Standardised test scores of other pupils are confidential but it does not stop 'insider' parents seeking out this information, especially from unsuspecting, newly probated, teachers or indeed, experienced ones.

2.3.5 Diversity of Class and Race:

Parental involvement seems to come in two broad categories: Working class parents who are targeted by Home-School-Community-Liaison personnel and Middle class parents who are members of the Parents' Association and are engaged mainly in fundraising. While both endeavours are commendable, they tend to operate separately. Diversity of *race* is not yet as relevant an issue outside of the main urban centres as it is in the cities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that minority groups from other countries (of which there has been a noticeable upsurge in recent years) are following the trends in parental involvement we see exemplified in the work of McGrath and Kuriloff.⁵⁰ In that study, parents on the periphery tended to be black African mothers. Race issues in the study were a conflation of race and social class, the authors say, and may have been more than that, but they did not have evidence to support any broader conclusions.

⁴⁸M. Lyons, *et al*, *Inside Classrooms: The teaching and learning of mathematics in social context*, (Dublin: IPA, 2003) p.329.

⁴⁹S. Gewirtz, S. Ball and R. Bowe, R. *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995) p.55.

⁵⁰D. McGrath and P. Kuriloff, " 'They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place': Upper- Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children" in *Educational Policy*, Vol.13, 1999, p. 624.

McGrath and Kuriloff⁵¹ suggest that those who want to expand the diversity of involved parents will need to perform active outreach. They believe that most administrators recognise that issues of race, social class, and parents' lifelong experiences of schools complicate the broadening of parent involvement. In addition to this, school cultures have, for years, either unwittingly or deliberately actually promoted non-involvement.

2.3.6 Excluding Some Parents:

McGrath and Kuriloff⁵² question whether schools can gain the intended benefits of parent involvement without the downside of involved parents excluding other parents and using their influence to promote their own narrow self-interests.

It is likely that once principals, teachers and parents are aware that this is a possible and undesirable outcome of parental involvement, it can be at least minimised and even turned to the advantage of other parents. McGrath and Kuriloff⁵³ explain how this could happen. Presented with a parental request, a teacher or principal could attempt to broaden it seeing that others could benefit from the same request. Principals and teachers could attempt to involve other parents influenced by the request.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

2.4 Political Reasons for Parental Involvement:

2.4.1 Democracy:

There is no doubt that governments have played a role in encouraging parental involvement by altering the climate of opinion through the enactment of what one OECD report⁵⁴ calls “orientation” laws. Parent involvement in education, among most OECD countries, is seen as an outright democratic value. In Ireland, the Education Act of 1998 places parents at the centre of the education process, and gives them a wide range of statutory rights in relation to education e.g. the right to send their child to the school of their choice, and the right to be consulted on the development of a school plan and the right to establish a parents’ association. Indeed, the Board of Management has a duty to facilitate the latter. While such legislation is unlikely to propel parents unproblematically into a role as participants, it can prepare the way for it. Circular 24/91⁵⁵ pledged formal Department commitment to the promotion of parental participation in the education of their children as ‘...an essential strategy of educational policy and practice’.

The idea of participative democracy has been criticized by Selznick,⁵⁶ which he claims, is a particularly potent way of discouraging challenges as it gives ‘the illusion of voice without the voice itself’. Vincent and Martin⁵⁷ found that by and large, in terms of having a voice, the parents in that study ‘were captured by the school’s agenda and rarely challenged that position’. The

⁵⁴ Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, *Parents as Partners in Schooling*, (Paris: OECD, 1997) p. 29.

⁵⁵ A Circular is one of a range of informal administrative tools, traditionally used in Ireland and issued on the authority of the Department of Education, but without any statutory force.

⁵⁶ Philip Selznick in C. Vincent and J. Martin, “School-based parents’ groups – a politics of voice and representation?” *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 15, 2000, No.5, pp. 459-480.

⁵⁷ C. Vincent, and J. Martin, “School-based parents’ groups – a politics of voice and representation?” *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 15, 2000, No.5, pp.459-480.

study also found that the schools were slow to respond to even small changes that parents suggested and parents, it seemed, were not greatly disgruntled by this.

2.4.2 *Accountability:*

This market-oriented concept, embraced most enthusiastically by England and Wales, Canada and the US seeks to make schools more accountable to the society that funds them. Vincent⁵⁸ reminds us "that the 'need' for a shift in emphasis towards vocational education in the mid 1970s, and increased teacher accountability, was occasioned, first by employers' complaints about the irrelevance of education to the world of work'. Secondly, there was alleged parental concern, underwritten by the media, concerning 'excessive' teacher autonomy.

There is no doubt that increasingly, parents are playing a role in ensuring that schools operate efficiently, effectively and provide value for money. This role has been enhanced through parental choice, where parents are in a position to exercise it⁵⁹ and through the predominantly middle class parental voice on Boards of Management and the National Parents' Council.⁶⁰

Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz⁶¹ demonstrate how an analysis of the role and functioning of the market in education allows us to see the link between the

⁵⁸ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.23.

⁵⁹ Diane Reay has explored the constraints and the complex intricacies of educational choice in "Contextualising Choice: social power and parental involvement", *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol.22, 1996, No.5, pp. 581-596.

⁶⁰ Hanafin and Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.23, 2002, No. 1, p.10.

⁶¹ S. Ball, R. Bowe, and S. Gewirtz, "Circuits of Schooling: A Sociological exploration of parental choice of school in social class contexts", *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 1995, pp.52-78.

ideological and structural aspects of a public service market and how they are serving to reproduce class relations and economic advantage.

2.4.3 Consumer choice:

The underlying assumption here is that when parents think of themselves as consumers, they are likely to conceptualise more clearly what they want and be more critical of what they are offered, thus pushing schools into meeting their needs more effectively. Carr⁶² comments that the 'market' model of democracy encourages an 'individualistic' society and a 'politically passive citizenry'. This market-driven approach is sharply criticised by Robertson⁶³ who reminds us that markets are not moral and are 'necessarily preoccupied with self-interest and advantage and as such are unfit arbiters of our collective well-being'. She cautions that 'the customer' to be satisfied is becoming less the student and more the corporation as future employer.

Vincent⁶⁴ offers another perspective:

The legislation of the late 1980s and early 1990s has given parents power as consumers which some parents, mainly members of the professional middle class, are able to exploit. What parents have not been offered is the collective political power to influence the decision-making, which determines the organisation of their children's education.

In addition to this, many authors, including Gewirtz, *et al*⁶⁵ and Reay⁶⁶ have conducted research where findings reveal that only parents, who are

⁶² Carr, (1991) in Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.156.

⁶³ Heather-Jane Robertson, "Public Education in a Corporate Dominated Culture", in *International Handbook of Educational Change*, eds. A. Hargreaves *et al*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998) p.397.

⁶⁴ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.73.

⁶⁵ S. Gewirtz, S. Ball and R. Bowe, *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995) p.55.

⁶⁶ Diane Reay, "Contextualising Choice: social power and parental involvement" *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 22, 1996, No.5, pp. 581-596.p.594.

proactive consumers, with the necessary cultural capital and finance *actually have a choice*. This group, they argue, are taking full advantage of 'the market' by activating cultural resources in the realization of social advantage. Choice, it has been shown is very directly and powerfully related to social class differences. Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz⁶⁷ state that choice is emerging 'as a major new factor in maintaining and indeed reinforcing social class divisions and inequalities'. Choosing is a multifaceted process and there are clear indications here of class, 'race', and gender dimensions to choice, where working class parents are engaged in a qualitatively different process to middle class parents.

Reay⁶⁸ highlights that choice as it is frequently written in official and educational texts is decontextualised. Her findings suggest that the choices black parents are making needs to be embedded in a recognition of the social dynamics of racism.

2.4.4 Lever for raising standards:

Findings from large-scale studies in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US⁶⁹ show that schools in which pupils do well (both academically and socially) are characterised by good home-school relations. Specifically, parents' involvement in instructionally related activities at home and/or in the classroom is associated with improvements in academic achievement.

⁶⁷ S. Ball, R. Bowe, and S. Gewirtz, "Circuits of Schooling: A Sociological exploration of parental choice of school in social class contexts", *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 1995, pp.52-78.

⁶⁸ Diane Reay, "Contextualising Choice: social power and parental involvement" *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 22, 1996, No.5, pp. 581-596.p.594.

⁶⁹ Dauber & Epstein, 1989; Epstein, 1988; Epstein and Dauber, 1988; Fantini, 1980; Mortimore et al., 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989; Wilson & Corcoran, 1988; Ziegler, 1987, in M.Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, (London: Falmer Press, 1991)

Tizard⁷⁰ for example, discovered that in inner city, multi-racial schools it is both feasible and practicable to involve nearly all parents in formal educational activities with infant and first-year junior school children, even if parents are non-literate or largely non-English speaking. He also found that children who receive parental help are significantly better in reading attainment than comparable children who do not. Parents in the study expressed great satisfaction in being involved in this way. Teachers reported that the children became more motivated to learn and better behaved. Interestingly, small group instruction in reading, given by a highly competent specialist teacher 'did not produce improvements in attainment comparable in magnitude with those obtained from collaboration with parents'.

The focus of Smyth's⁷¹ study was on identifying and exploring the impact of key schooling processes, which are associated with positive outcomes among pupils at Junior and Leaving Certificate Level. The limited information available on parental involvement in the sampled schools indicated a positive association between the extent of such involvement and pupil outcomes. The study identifies formal initiatives such as the Home-School Liaison Scheme as having met with some success.⁷²

These kinds of studies add weight to the growing movement to increase parental involvement in their children's schooling. The studies are not without their critics, however. Vincent,⁷³ for example, states that *conclusive*

⁷⁰ J. Tizard, W. Schofield, and J. Hewison, "Collaboration between teachers and parents in Assisting Children's Reading", *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 52, 1982, pp.1-15. p.14.

⁷¹ Emer Smyth, *Do Schools Differ? Academic and Personal Development among pupils in the Second-Level Sector*. (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 1999)

⁷² S. Ryan, *Home-School-Community Liaison: Final Evaluation Report*, (Dublin: Educational Research Centre, 1994).

⁷³ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.75.

evidence of the *direct* link between parental involvement and achievement is difficult to obtain because of the many variables involved. Increasing the congruence between home and school often means in practice, that the home is required to change to match the school. This is a task, she points out, which many parents will be unable or unwilling to undertake.

2.4.5 Tackling disadvantage and improving equity:

This refers more explicitly to the raising of individual children's performance by enabling their parents to support them more effectively at home. Epstein and Dauber⁷⁴ report that teachers with more positive attitudes toward parental involvement report more success in involving 'hard to reach parents including working parents, less educated parents, single parents, parents of older students, young parents, parents new to the school, and other adults with whom children live'.

They also found that parents' level of involvement is directly linked to the specific practices of the school that encourage involvement at school and that a *school's practice* to inform and involve parents is more important than parent education, family size, marital status and grade level in determining whether inner city parents stay involved with their children's education through the middle grades.

Fullan⁷⁵ highlights the importance of parental involvement practices succeeding with less-educated parents and disadvantaged students where it

⁷⁴ Epstein and Dauber in M. Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, (London: Falmer Press, 1991) p.235.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

is crucial that the school make a difference. However Hallgarten⁷⁶ notes that 'in its current condition, parental involvement in children's learning is normally less of a protective barrier for disadvantaged children than a lever to maximise the potential of the already advantaged'.

2.4.6 Resources:

Not only do parents raise extra funds for schools, but they can also be a cost effective way of mobilising resources. However, Macbeth⁷⁷ objects to fundraising being part of the remit of Parent Associations except to finance improved home-school liaison. The fund-raising function can (and does) discourage parents from becoming involved in what is a crucial activity. However, it is likely that parents who become involved in fundraising acquire a new awareness of how under-resourced schools are, and how they will need to tailor their expectations accordingly.

Schools with ever higher and more complex academic demands need their students to be well socialised and independent so that they are *ready* to learn in both formal and informal ways. Parents are the resource that socialises and prepares their children for learning. An OECD report⁷⁸ identifies parental involvement as particularly crucial as countries move into an era of lifelong learning.

⁷⁶ Hallgarten (2000) in Hanafin and Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.23, 2002, No.1, p.10.

⁷⁷ Alastair Macbeth, *Involving Parents: Effective Parent-Teacher Relations* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1989).

⁷⁸ Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, *Parents as Partners in Schooling*, (Paris: OECD, 1997).

2.4.7 Parents' Reasons for Involvement:

Atkins, Bastiani and Goode⁷⁹ put forward a range of parents' reasons for volunteering or accepting invitations to help. These include wanting to help their own child, wanting to be involved in the school/classroom in general, wanting to compare their own child with other children, wanting to establish or verify views about the school/classroom from the inside and wanting to meet other parents. There are others. Vincent and Martin⁸⁰ report that the parents in their study attended forum meetings⁸¹ motivated by their own individualist concerns. These parents appeared as classic examples of middle class parents exploiting their knowledge and skills, their positional advantages, in pursuit of particular, private, educational gains.

What is regarded as a legitimate motivation for participation? Vincent agrees that rendering individuals concerns invalid will detract from people's willingness to participate. I agree with her statement that self-interest is incomplete as an explanation for participation or at least, that it can be more widely conceived.

2.5 The Value of Parental Involvement:

The dominant orthodoxy in home-school links derives from the perception that parental involvement is a 'distinct, possibly irreplaceable, influence on

⁷⁹ J. Atkins, J. Bastiani, and J. Goode, *Listening to Parents – An Approach to the Improvement of Home-School Relations*, (New York: Croom Helm, 1988) p.158.

⁸⁰ C. Vincent, and J. Martin, "School-based parents' groups – a politics of voice and representation?" *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 15, 2000, No.5, pp.459-480.

⁸¹ Parents' forums on education, which, they argue, were potentially examples of participative, deliberative democracy.

children's learning'⁸². Fullan agrees saying that the one consistent message emerging from all the research is that 'the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement'. He believes that unless parents and teachers recognise the crucial complementarity of each other's roles in the lives of students they will fail to realise the improvements in learning that could be made.

Bastiani⁸³ states that improving home school relationships brings important mutual benefits to children and their families, to schools and their communities. He reminds us that parents may have a wealth of skills and expertise that, in his view, remains largely unrecognised and almost entirely untapped. He adds that most teachers realise that there are significant gains to be made by improving home school practice, but that it involves much more than the development of positive attitudes. It involves the development of new skills and practices as well.

Research by Mortimer *et al*⁸⁴ shows that parental interest in and attitude towards education is positively correlated with academic achievement. Tizard⁸⁵ points to a link between parental involvement and reading attainment. In both the USA and Britain studies have linked parental involvement in education with increased school effectiveness.

⁸²Hallgarten (2000) in Hanafin and Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.23, 2002, No.1, p.10.

⁸³ John Bastiani, *Working with Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Oxford: Nfer-Nelson, 1989) p.12.

⁸⁴ P. Mortimore *et al*, *School Matters: The Junior Years* (London: Open Books, 1988)

⁸⁵ J. Tizard, W. Schofield, and J. Hewison, J. "Collaboration between teachers and parents in Assisting Children's Reading", *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 52, 1-15, 1982.

In the study conducted by Jowett *et al*⁸⁶ parents and staff pointed to considerable benefits that could accrue from systematic efforts to enhance the contact between parents and those with professional responsibility for their children.

However, there is a dearth of this kind of research in Ireland. In his review of research for the National Parents' Council (Primary) Wall⁸⁷ cautions that translating findings from one society to another can be misleading 'particularly in view of the fact that US findings on issues such as parenting strategies have differed significantly from one ethnic group to another'.

In addition to this, Vincent's⁸⁸ criticism of what she calls 'perfunctory' and 'superficial' discussions around home school issues has been mentioned already. She states that tension and conflict are edited out of the relationship by the use of consensual language, which runs the risk of obscuring difficulties in interpretation and emphasis. She declares that consensual words and phrases, although vague, and lacking specificity, can be powerful in constructing norms for home school relations, which, if not realised could generate feelings of disillusionment and inadequacy and ultimately cause initiatives to fail. She notes that in the recounting of projects 'a cheery, unflinching, positive tone seems de rigueur' which means that pitfalls, problems and failures get edited out of 'the story' being told. She asserts that this

⁸⁶ S. Jowett, M. Baginsky and M. McDonald-McNeill, *Building Bridges – Parental Involvement in Schools*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1991) p.137.

⁸⁷ Wall, Eugene (2000) *Promoting Literacy in Children and Families: A Review of Research*, Unpublished Report, Prepared for the National Parents Council (Primary), M.I.C.E. Limerick.

⁸⁸ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.73.

manner of dissemination means that it is difficult to get beneath the rhetoric and critically assess projects.

2.6 Parental Involvement and Special Education:

2.6.1 *Journey Towards Inclusiveness:*

Kenny *et al*⁸⁹ describe the experience of the parents of children with Down Syndrome in their study:

They discovered that having fallen outside the norms of parents-and-child, they had to beg and plead, negotiate everything in order to place their child in the 'normal' world, in mainstream, rather than segregated provision. In the process, they moved from ignorance to knowledge, from fear and pleading to assertiveness based on conviction of their child's rights.

These parents, the study reports, had to inform and persuade school authorities and staff who, they felt, should have been pro-actively informed, skilled, and supported from within the education system, to include their child.

2.6.2 *Effects of Parents as Teachers:*

When considering parental involvement, it should be recognized that the severity of a student's disability might directly impact on parental time, responsibilities and energy. Arising from this, additional demands placed on parents may contribute to tension within the parent(s)-child relationship. Turnbull and Turnbull⁹⁰ highlight that the impact of the parent-as-teacher role on parent-child relationships has received negligible professional attention. Anecdotal accounts from some parents, they say, indicate unintended

⁸⁹ Kenny, M., Mc Neela, E. Noonan Walsh, P. and Shevlin, M. "In the Morning the Dark Opens" – A study of the experience of parents of children with Down Syndrome and other learning disabilities in mainstream schools: why this choice was made, how it was achieved, and hopes for the future.

⁹⁰ A. Turnbull and H. Turnbull (1990) in Debra and Patrick Morrissette, "Rethinking Parental Participation in Special Education" *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, Vol. 3, 1999, No.14. pp. 125- 149

consequences, such as guilt and anxiety if parents are not constantly working with their son or daughter.



Photo 1 - Parent volunteers in the classroom

Morrisette and Morrisette⁹¹ voice this perspective in relation to parental participation in special education:

Despite appearing logical and reasonable, parental participation in special education continues to be a complex and controversial issue... the notion that parental involvement benefits all students, parents, and school personnel remains unsubstantiated and denies the uniqueness of individuals and can inadvertently contribute to unnecessary conflict within families and between parents and school personnel.

They go on to suggest that a balanced view of parental participation is lacking and several considerations related to parental participation deserve attention.

As Mehan⁹² and colleagues point out, special educational meetings are heavily constrained by legal and administrative factors. Legally, in Britain, the parents of children with special needs are given a significant role; parents must annually approve of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for their child with special needs developed by the school. In reality, however, the educational decision is often made before the meeting or during the session

⁹¹Debra and Patrick Morrisette, "Rethinking Parental Participation in Special Education" *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, Vol. 3, 1999, No.14, pp. 125-149.

⁹² Mehan *et al* (1986) in Annette Lareau, *Home advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, (Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989) p.147.

with limited input from parents. Parents, Mehan states, merely ratify the decisions made by the professionals. In Ireland legislation for the education of children and adults with Special Educational Needs has been slow to emerge. The Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill 2003, will be enacted in 2004. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the quality of parental involvement in the devising of IEPs in Ireland is minimal. Within this broad trend there appears to be significant variations in parent-involvement, dependent upon the social and cultural capital of the parents, their knowledge of the education system and the growth of an individualistic culture.

2.6.3. *Articulating Limited Parental Involvement:*

Morrisette and Morrisette⁹³ believe that it is imperative to distinguish between parental involvement in the educational process and overall parental involvement. In other words, they say, 'parental choice to be minimally involved in a child's educational program should not be contiguously equated with parental disinterest in a child's life.'

Turnbull and Turnbull⁹⁴ go a step further by asserting that a model for parental involvement should include the option of non-involvement. Underlying this view is the belief that parental non-involvement may be a reflection of the stresses imposed by children on parental coping abilities. Another perspective is that parents might choose not to be involved in their

⁹³ Debra and Patrick Morrisette, "Rethinking Parental Participation in Special Education" *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, Vol. 3, 1999, No.14, pp. 125-149.

⁹⁴ Turnbull and Turnbull in Debra and Patrick Morrisette, "Rethinking Parental Participation in Special Education" *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, Vol. 3, 1999, No.14, pp. 125-149.

child's educational programme in order to sustain their parental effectiveness or maintain a balanced commitment to other family members.

Yanoff⁹⁵ reminds us of the possibility of a parent's involvement being tied up with their personal denial of the child's disability. This perception is likely to put a strain on all the relationships involved and place a particular burden on the child with special educational needs. It is another important consideration in the parent involvement discourse and introduces the next question.

2.7 Is Parental Involvement Always Desirable?

Another recent development is that the unproblematic assertion that parental involvement is always a good thing has been questioned.⁹⁶ Difficulties have been highlighted. Parents' roles may be limited and constrained, it may be difficult for controversial parent views to get a hearing and the involvement may be driven by individualist concerns. McAllister Swap⁹⁷ acknowledges that parental involvement *in schools* is not beneficial when "it intrudes on the independence of the child, inhibits the development of a relationship between teacher and child, or interferes with the teacher's professional responsibilities". Edwards and Alldred⁹⁸ have explored the processes of

⁹⁵ Jerome Yanoff, *The Classroom Teacher's Inclusion Handbook* (Chicago: Arthur Coyle Press, 2000)

⁹⁶ G. Crozier, "Empowering the Powerful: a discussion of the interrelation of government policies with social class factors and the impact of this upon parent interventions in their children's schooling", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 17, 1997, No. 1, pp. 53-64. and C. Vincent and J. Martin (2000) "School-based parents' groups – a politics of voice and representation?", *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 15, 2000, No. 5, pp. 459-480.

⁹⁷ S. McAllister Swap, *Enhancing Parental Involvement in Schools*, (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1987) p.vii.

⁹⁸ R. Edwards, and P. Alldred, "A Typology of Parental Involvement in Education Centring on Children and Young People: Negotiating Familialisation, Institutionalisation and Individualisation", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 21, 2000, No. 3.

familialisation, institutionalisation and individualisation and are of the opinion that:

...attempts to involve parents in their children's education... are not necessarily an unmitigated good. They will differentially impact on, and be shaped by, children and young people from various social groups (which tend to coalesce in particular schools), introducing further tensions into the relationship between the processes of familialisation, institutionalisation and individualisation in their lives.

Furthermore they argue that:

...the concentration on home-school partnership and parental involvement in education risks riding roughshod over children's and young people's privacy boundaries generally, and narrowing their ability to creatively and complexly manoeuvre and respond to shades of parental involvement in education.

They remind us of the importance of balancing the children's *educational* interests with their *social* interests.

They conclude, 'Children's and young people's role in home-school relations does need to be considered if policy makers and practitioners wish to intensify parental involvement in education'.

2.8 Parent -Teacher Relationships:

Cultivating good working relationships can be at the same time challenging and rewarding, problematic and contradictory. Parents' attitudes towards education and their experience of their children's schools, Atkins, Bastiani and Goode⁹⁹ point out, vary in important and interesting ways. This is one reason perhaps why relationships between families and schools are not as straightforward as they are often made out to be. Families and schools are different kinds of institutions and important differences and inevitable

⁹⁹ J. Atkins, J. Bastiani, J. Goode, *Listening to Parents – An Approach to the Improvement of Home-School Relations*, (New York: Croom Helm, 1988)

tensions must be recognised and tackled – not swept under the carpet. For real growth of home-school relations, Atkins, Bastiani and Goode¹⁰⁰ advise that thinking and practice must develop together.

For educators, family involvement can be bittersweet; while appreciative of parent support, there are costs for them in reduced professional autonomy. Tuohy¹⁰¹ comments that teachers remain circumspect regarding the growth of 'parent power'. She describes teachers as caught in a dilemma between, on the one hand, seeking to involve parents, and on the other hand, 'controlling their interference or maintaining the professional boundary'. She concludes that teachers in her study did not welcome the development of 'parent power'. They have, she opines, a particular set of expectations of parents' role and behaviour, and are finding it difficult to adjust to this notion of 'partnership' or 'power sharing'. She says there is a growing yearning for more clarity and definition in relation to parents' role in education.

Lareau¹⁰² also discusses the intensity of the relationships between the school and upper-middle class parents and the possibility of less strained relationships and tensions between working class parents and the schools their children attended. This observation has been borne out in my experience as a teacher.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Tuohy, Mary (1999) *Changing Society, Changing Schools: Emerging Demands on the Primary Teacher*, Unpublished M.Ed. Thesis, NUI, Maynooth.

¹⁰² Annette Lareau, *Home advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, (Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989)

2.9 Issues of Power in Parental Involvement:

Vincent¹⁰³ argues that the unequal power relations between the two groups shape parent-teacher relationships. As teachers are predominantly white, middle-class individuals¹⁰⁴ their relationships with working class parents are shaped by an imbalance of structural power, in class terms, at least. In addition, a teacher's professional identity may enable him/her to remain dominant in a relationship with parents with whom s/he shares a social position.

Continuing the power theme, Vincent¹⁰⁵ also highlights that advocating increased powers for such a heterogeneous group as parents raises a classic liberal dilemma, namely if groups of parents employ their greater say in school affairs to achieve reactionary and discriminatory goals, what response should be made? The McDonald Report,¹⁰⁶ commenting on the wishes of some parents for mono-cultural education states that schools should not simply bend to parents' prejudices. Gutmann¹⁰⁷ asserts that neither party has the exclusive right over children's education and that a broadly based decision-making procedure based on certain principles allows the state to encroach upon parents' absolute freedom in respect of their children's education, particularly when the choices of some (more influential) parents could negatively impact on the children of others.

¹⁰³ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996)

¹⁰⁴ Musgrave (1979) in Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.76.

¹⁰⁵ Carol Vincent, (1996) *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.152.

¹⁰⁶ The McDonald Report in Carol Vincent, (1996) *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.153.

¹⁰⁷ Gutmann in Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.153.

The idea of a contract or signed agreement by the parent in which they agree to co-operate with the school in certain ways related to the learning process is explored by Jones, Bastiani, Bell and Chapman¹⁰⁸. It contradicts Bastiani's earlier assertion that communications with schools tend to be too formal and that more informality is needed.

It is likely that the *process* whereby a three-way interview between parent, child and teacher which sets out what parent and teacher will do for the child over the coming year, with a chance for the child to identify an area in which s/he will make a special effort would yield results. The writing of this on paper as a contract serves to clarify mutual expectations and help parent teacher and learner focus on the child's progress.

2.10 Conclusion:

There has been much written on the involvement of parents in schooling, from the most trivial of involvement to power-sharing involvement in the classroom aimed at a kind of participative democracy. The latter seems to be quite rare.

The issues around it are many and complex and embedded in an historical, political, economic and sociological context. The most fundamental of these issues, it seems to me, is *why* parental involvement? or indeed *why not*? The answer lies in these political, historical, economic and sociological contexts. Authors have cited reasons that relate to citizenship and the

¹⁰⁸ Jones, Bastiani, Bell and Chapman, *A Willing Partnership*, (London: Home-School Contract of Partnership, 1993).

common good. Those parents who can, may choose to become involved for a variety of reasons. Again, these can be varied and complex but firmly rooted in their own child's betterment. Some parents do not have a choice in whether to be involved at school level or not.

Bastiani¹⁰⁹ urges a critical and rigorous examination of existing arrangements vis-à-vis parental involvement as a starting point. He states that the identification of strengths and weaknesses in relation to involvement can serve as a powerful stimulus to further development. In engaging in this process, the *how* of the involvement is probably more important than the *what*. Related to the *how* of involvement are issues such as power and accountability. The power imbalances between teacher and parent, and the issue of mutual accountability in education are crucial to furthering relationships that have as their main aim effective schooling, equity and accountable citizenship.

¹⁰⁹ John Bastiani, *Working with Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1989) p.19.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Wolfendale¹¹⁰ contends that researchers have been guilty of having given scant regard to the methodological and ethical factors and limitations inherent in parent-focused studies, especially when so many of the projects have been predicated upon partnership with parents, based on principles of equality, rights/entitlement, reciprocity, and empowerment. I tried to engage in an ethical, principled approach to my research and development work with parents.

3.2 The Research Site

This junior school, while it has disadvantage status, serves a mixed community in a large, growing urban centre within Dublin's commuter belt. It feeds a senior school on the same campus and entry applications exceed places, with an age cut-off point to restrict numbers. Both schools have had extensive refurbishment during the period of the research.

There are more than four hundred students taught by seventeen classroom teachers and 3 learning support teachers, supported by a team of 5 special needs assistants. Significantly for this study, the school also has a Home School Community Liaison person, for the past 5 years. The schools employ a counsellor and a community worker through the Schools Completion

¹¹⁰ Sheila Wolfendale, "Parents as Partners in Research and Evaluation: Methodological and Ethical Issues and Solutions", *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 26, 1999, No. 3, pp. 156-61.

Initiative to address an identified problem of poor school attendance in the town. The school has a small number of international children.

The school's culture has changed significantly with the appointment of a principal six years ago, who is attempting to create a density of leadership within a democratic, power-sharing framework. There is an active parents' council and the new Board of Management was elected and began its first term of office during the period of this study.

There are very few male teachers on the staff, which, apart from a gender imbalance, is comprised of a healthy mix of teachers at different stages of their professional lives.

3.3 School and Teacher Culture:

The leadership has significantly influenced the school and teacher culture. In my opinion, it seeks to be open and accountable and caring of both staff and children.

Agendas for staff meetings are organised democratically and new ways are constantly being sought to improve participation and fairness. Meetings are chaired on a rotation basis and minutes kept and circulated prior to the next meeting.

Successes are celebrated and in my two years there I have enjoyed and participated in conviviality and collegiality. A staff member puts fresh flowers

on the staff room tables every few weeks. A housekeeper is employed to attend to the staff room and other duties.

However, the staff has experienced one of the most difficult years in its recent history in attempting to work during a refurbishment. Classes were temporarily displaced in prefabricated buildings, in addition to a whole host of major and minor disruptions, annoyances, intrusions, inconveniences and obstacles to teaching. The principal became what was jokingly called 'a building principal' with most of his time devoted to attendance at 'building meetings' and securing the best possible compromise between architects, builders, plumbers, and electricians.

3.4 Profile of the Author:

I have had twenty years of teaching experience. As a newly qualified teacher in the eighties, I had numerous temporary appointments in urban and rural settings, which, though difficult at the time, were invaluable in providing a breadth of experience.

I spent nine years as a Learning Support Teacher in a shared capacity in two small single sex schools in an urban setting. Attendance at the various conferences organised by the Irish Learning Support Association and membership of the study group that became an Education Centre prompted me to apply to train as a tutor with the I.N.T.O.'s¹¹¹ growing Professional

¹¹¹ Irish National Teacher's Organisation

Development team. I subsequently facilitated summer courses for primary teachers in the area of Learning Difficulties/Literacy for a number of years.

I was seconded to the Primary Curriculum Support Programme in 1999 and facilitated courses in the revised Primary Curriculum, for two years, before becoming a Cuiditheoir¹¹², engaged in supporting its implementation in schools.

Following my secondment, I was appointed to the staff of my present school.

¹¹² Cuiditheoir is the Irish word for support person.

3.5 The Classroom:

The class comprises twenty-seven, six and seven year-old children, fifteen girls and twelve boys. The author finds the class challenging in every respect. The most difficult aspect is meeting the multiple, diverse needs in a cultural climate of *immediacy*, and *individualism*, where children want help and they want it *now*. There are two children with physical disabilities in the class and another has been categorised as an elective mute. Two other children are exhibiting behaviours associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Three children with a record of low attendance have accompanying difficulties in relation to social and cultural capital.



Photo 2 – Writing Process in Action

3.6 Action Research, Case Study or Participant Observation?

I used a range of approaches to gather data from which to infer, interpret, explain and predict. I used methods of normative research, such as a questionnaire and those associated with the interpretive paradigm – participant observation and non-directive interviewing. Merton and Kendall¹¹³ remind us that combining the valuable features of both qualitative and quantitative data gathering facilitates the complementarity that exists between the two.

3.7 Reflection on Processes:

My research is based on reflecting qualitatively on key processes that communicate to parents in formal and informal ways that their involvement, in whatever way they can, is encouraged, valued, and facilitated. I aimed to further the cultural change that has started in my school to involve parents in more meaningful ways. I made notes on what I considered were key observations.

I am conscious of and agree with Lareau's¹¹⁴ findings where she highlights that while teachers want parental involvement; their actions suggest that they do not want 'partnership', which would imply a power sharing relationship. I aimed to 'power share' in my interactions with parents by introducing myself using my first name and using their first names when I became acquainted with them. I aimed to welcome them into the classroom at times when I was

¹¹³ R. K. Merton and P.L. Kendall, in Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion *Research Methods in Education, Fourth Edition*, (London: Cassell, 1994) p.26.

¹¹⁴ Annette Lareau, *Home Advantage- Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education, Second Edition*, (Maryland, U.S: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) p. 35.

not teaching so they could become acquainted with the work that was being done, and with their children's own work. I agree with Bastiani's¹¹⁵ assertion that a reduction in the formality associated with teacher-parent interactions can help facilitate open and honest communication, which is a crucial aspect to meaningful parental involvement.

I took field-notes, mindful of Vincent's¹¹⁶ criticisms mentioned already, and was conscious of not editing pitfalls, problems and failures out of the process.

3.8 School Cultural Influences on Parental Involvement

With a growing sense of the complexity and power of cultures within and without the school system, I aimed to play my part in furthering a culture of meaningful involvement and power sharing. I was mindful of Atkins, Bastiani and Goode's¹¹⁷ assertion:

The willingness to listen to what parents are saying about their child's education and to be responsive to that is an important philosophical stance for teachers, based upon the right of parents, the importance of their support and their value as an educational resource.

When the children came to the classroom on the first day of term, I made a point of engaging with as many parents as possible on that first morning. I asked if everything was okay with their child and watched out for anxious parents who might have wanted to communicate an important piece of information in a discreet way, without making an issue of it for their child. I resolved to do this for as long as it would take for parents and children to feel

¹¹⁵ J. Atkins, J. Bastiani, J. Goode, *Listening to Parents – An Approach to the Improvement of Home-School Relations*, (New York: Croom Helm, 1988)

¹¹⁶ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996) p.73.

¹¹⁷ J. Atkins, J. Bastiani, & J. Goode, *Listening to Parents – An Approach to the Improvement of Home-School Relations*, (New York: Croom Helm, 1988).

at ease with the new learning environment. I wanted them to believe that their particular concerns would be listened to and responded to, if not immediately, in due course. This process took longer than I expected. It seemed to me that some 'needy' parents were also presenting, and that they would talk for as long as I was willing to listen. I had to be conscious of balancing the rights and needs of both adults and children. After a time, I learned to disengage from one parent, in order to engage with another, or in order to engage with the children, who would also actively seek my individual attention at the start of the day.

Being a parent of a child the same age as the children I teach, I wanted to give parents the welcome, the hearing I would like to get if I were to present myself at the classroom door on September first.

With that in mind I made sure I was as welcoming as possible in my demeanour and in the language I used both with the children and with the parents I met. I was particularly aware of three new children who were making the transition from a different school to a new one and how important this first day and first week would be for them.

3.9 Formal Communication Structures:

The school holds class meetings for all parents (thirty minutes duration) culminating in an annual general meeting (thirty minutes duration) in the hall for all parents. In preparation for the class meeting the researcher liaised with the former Home School Community Liaison teacher and it was decided to

arrange the children's tables in a circle for the parents to sit on. We wanted parents, who probably didn't know each other to at least be in a position to see each other's faces. Large, laminated copies of the children's names were put on the tables so that parents could have a focus when they first entered the classroom. It was agreed that in the absence of adult chairs, we would invite parents to use the tables as the only suitable seating alternative, since the small children's chairs could emphasise a power differential. I sat on a table also. A personal note, which served as a counterpoint to the formal, official, school letter, was sent to parents. My colleague, from her experience as Home School Community Liaison Person, identified the formal school note as 'a constant barrier to home-school communication in this school'. The personal note addressed parents by their first names and encouraged them to come on the night and was signed using our first names.

Parents were asked at the meeting what they were hoping for this year for their children. In the event of there being no response, a few bulleted points were prepared on a wipe-clean board.

3.10 Securing Parental Involvement

At this meeting a routine request is made for parental involvement at every class level. A sheet listing the various ways in which parents might be prepared to help is distributed. *Classroom* involvement is not on the list so I made a verbal request for volunteers to help with literacy games. The commitment I sought was for one hour, three days a week, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, for six weeks before Christmas.

3.11 Questionnaire:

Weisberg and Bowen¹¹⁸ highlight the importance of using a quality questionnaire to be successful, one where the most data is collected and where the respondent is pleased to have participated. I designed and administered a questionnaire (See Appendix 1) to gather information in general terms on what parents think about the school and parental involvement in it. I intended to use it as a backdrop against which to triangulate. I piloted it on friends and family – 5 respondents. This was a most useful exercise because it helped me to refocus on important data that I wanted to collect and improve clarity. Bell¹¹⁹ makes the point that a study using a questionnaire may also have qualitative features and the author extrapolated some interesting, qualitative information from four open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire. Cohen and Mannion¹²⁰ state:

Open-ended questions have a number of advantages: they are flexible, they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth...they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondent's knowledge; they encourage co-operation and helps establish rapport...[they] may also result in...unanticipated answers which may suggest hither to un-thought of relationships or hypotheses.

I decided to administer the questionnaire to the parents of the four different class levels in the school.

¹¹⁸ H. Weisberg and B.D. Bowen, *An Introduction to Survey Research and Data Analysis*, (San: Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1977)

¹¹⁹ Judith Bell, *Doing Your Research Project, Third edition*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999)

¹²⁰ L. Cohen and L. Manion (1994) *Research Methods in Education, Fourth Edition*, (London: Routledge, 1994) P.277.

3.12 Sample Population:

I limited the questionnaire to a sample class from each class grouping – junior infants, senior infants, first and second. I felt I could get the data I wanted from that sample and I visited those classes to distribute the questionnaires personally. I enlisted the help of those teachers to actively encourage the children to bring in the completed forms.

3.13 Questionnaire Design and Administration:

I tried to have the layout and presentation of the questionnaire as modern and clear as possible keeping in mind the observations and advice of the respondents to the pilot study. Oppenheim¹²¹ highlights the benefits of using such an instrument:

This method of data-collection ensures a high response rate, accurate sampling and a minimum of interviewer bias, while permitting interviewer assessments, providing necessary explanations...and giving the respondents a degree of personal contact.

It was constructed in four sections – Section 1 (multiple-choice) was designed to gather background information on the parents so a profile of a typical parent could be identified. Section 2 was comprised of eight questions four of which were used to validate the other four. Parents were asked to rate their responses on a scale – strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, Section 3 attempted to discover parents' educational priorities for their children. The author was careful not to lay out all the questions in an identical manner. The four open-ended questions in Section 4 were treated as an

¹²¹ A. N. Oppenheim, *Questionnaire Design and Attitude Measurement*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1996) P.36.

adjunct to the main questionnaire and required a different analysis. (See Appendix 1)

3.14 Focus Groups:

During the last week in October, my colleague and I held a short workshop immediately after school to train a small number of mothers (six in total) in facilitating small groups of children learning some literacy games. We focussed on what we hoped the children would learn from the experience, organisational issues, confidentiality issues and group dynamic issues. We also advised them that we would provide feedback at the end of the six weeks and that we would be seeking theirs. We made them aware that we would not be able to engage in any feedback sessions immediately after the activities much as we would like to. The mothers took home two games each to become familiar with at home. I took the opportunity to tell them about my study and to tell them that I would be seeking and documenting their views on the project. It would have been interesting to track their ideas and feelings after three weeks but constraints of time prevented me from doing this.

In line with feminist methodologies¹²² the researcher engaged in the development of non-hierarchical, reciprocal relationships where a bond arose from a shared experience of being female and a mother. I was concerned to develop a relationship and setting in which they could discuss the issues that arose for them in the classroom. Semi-structured interviews, Vincent¹²³ contends, have a considerable advantage in helping to avoid hierarchical

¹²² Stanley and Wise, (1983), in C. Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996)

¹²³ C. Vincent, *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*, (Bristol: Falmer Press, 1996)

researcher-respondent relationships. They allow respondents to introduce and develop themes, thereby giving them some control over the shape of the interview. They also allow a more natural conversational style to pervade the encounter.

3.15 Field Notes:

Aware of the 'socially constructed' nature of reality,¹²⁴ I observed parents interacting with the children, with their own children, with each other and with the author for the six-week period of the parent involvement project. I made field notes on what I saw, heard, and thought in complex situations, portraying many dimensions. I recorded my feelings as a method of controlling bias.¹²⁵

3.16 Semi-structured Interviews:

Following the project, my colleague and I arranged a review meeting at a time that would suit both parents and teachers. By this time an informal, friendly, relationship had been built up. We ensured that each parent had an interview schedule (See Appendix 2a) in advance of the meeting to facilitate their thinking and allow them to be prepared and also to pre-empt any feelings of anxiety that might discourage some of them from attending. Early in the interview, I informed the mothers of my purpose and assured them of confidentiality. Interviewees were encouraged to express themselves at some length, while the schedule prevented aimless rambling. I requested their

¹²⁴ Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, (1982) *Qualitative Research for Education – An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, (London: Allyn and Bacon Inc., 1982) p.32.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p.132.

permission to tape their views and none of the parents expressed a difficulty with that.

I agreed with my colleague, who had spent four years in the role of Home School Community Liaison, that it would be unfair to expect or indeed request that the parents have their children minded while they attended a review meeting of their volunteer work. I undertook to prepare activities the children could engage in, immediately after school, while we held our review meeting in the same room. Interestingly, the children's noise did not interfere with our discussion on the day but was very loud on the tape and made it difficult to review subsequently.

For the second focus group interview, a similar interview schedule to the first one (See Appendix 2b) was sent to parents in advance. I enlisted the help of another teaching colleague who agreed to supervise the children in the classroom next-door. This interview came out clearly on the tape. This time our project had focussed on the writing process. My colleague and I had spent some time outlining the process and the emphasis on drafting and getting one's ideas down on paper at a preliminary meeting. We emphasised the skills of editing that are an important part of that process. My field notes record:

[My colleague] and I were absolutely exhausted on Friday afternoon (no other date was suitable) and it was with difficulty we salvaged the energy to facilitate the session. It was an informal, relaxed session, but nonetheless, it was terrific having [my colleague] to de-brief with afterwards. Everybody was very positive and supportive. [One parent] made a suggestion about a technicality of the project, which we thought was a good idea and we resolved to adopt it.

3.17 What is Analysis?

Bogdan and Biklen¹²⁶ remind us that 'analysis involves working with the data, organising it and breaking it down into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned and deciding what to tell others'. They also caution that qualitative data should not be over-analysed and the richness of the language and descriptions of interviewees should not be lost.

3.18 Data Analysis:

A summary sheet was prepared for all questions before the questionnaires were distributed and returns were entered as they came in. The completed summary sheet gave a picture of emerging themes. Analysis of questionnaire data involved entering the data on an Excel spread sheet and drawing conclusions from the patterns of responses that were emerging. The open-ended questions had to be treated differently. The typed responses to the open-ended questions were printed out and a coding system used to identify categories of satisfaction and dissatisfaction among the parents.

The interview data, while interesting, was not surprising as the author had become aware of the parents' views through snatches of conversation during the projects. The second tape was clear and there was a lot of laughing as parents shared their individual experiences and how they had handled them.

¹²⁶ Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Bicklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, (London: Allyn and Bacon Inc., 1982) p.145.

3.19 Validity of Interview Data:

The author was constantly aware that the interviewees needed to be as relaxed as possible for reliable, honest data to be forthcoming. My colleague and I tried to create a relaxed, collaborative, honest environment by sharing some of our own feelings and expressing gratitude for their voluntary involvement. We presented ourselves as co-learners in this innovation.

Analysis of the questionnaire, field notes and semi-structured interviews are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Presentation and Analysis of Findings

4.1 Introduction:

The following themes have emerged from a process of analysis of survey data, field notes and the various processes to involve and engage parents in the education of their children and in the work of the school, described in chapter 3.

- Parental Perspectives on School Involvement
- Effects of Parental Involvement on Parents, Children and Teacher
- Teacher Perspectives on Parental Involvement
- Individual versus Collective Rights
- Securing Meaningful Parental Involvement

4.2 Parental Perspectives:

4.2.1 Parents' Availability to be Involved

Analysis of the data from Section 1 of the questionnaire revealed a typical parent profile. It is that of a married mother, in the thirty-one to thirty five age bracket, having achieved a minimum education qualification of Leaving Certificate with either single or dual income. McGrath and Kuriloff¹²⁷ highlight that mothers' availability for school activities is a major influence on differing levels of involvement. It is no surprise that the mothers involved in the two

¹²⁷ D. McGrath and P. Kuriloff, "They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place": Upper-Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children" in *Educational Policy*, Vol.13, 1999, pp. 603-629.

classroom projects do not work outside the home, i.e. they are available to be involved.

Social class differences in family life also shape family school relations according to Lareau¹²⁸ where rigid gender roles adopted by working-class couples mean that those parents would be more likely to see it as the mother's role to be involved in school activities. Only a very small proportion (3%) of the questionnaires returned in this study were completed by men and no father has ever volunteered for the 'Paired Reading' Programme in the school or become involved in classroom projects. It is likely that rigid gender roles have a significant part to play in this but far more significant is their unavailability to be involved during school hours because of work commitments, outside the home.

4.2.2 *Parents' views on School Culture*

4.2.2.1 *Level of Satisfaction with the School*

The indications are that parents are broadly happy with the school. Of those who returned questionnaires a large majority (eighty-seven per cent) reported feeling welcome when they visit the school and almost all (ninety two per cent) feel that the school has a caring attitude. They feel well informed about school activities and are pleased that their children are happy in school and that the teachers are getting the best out of their children.

¹²⁸ Annette Lareau, *Home advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, (Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989)

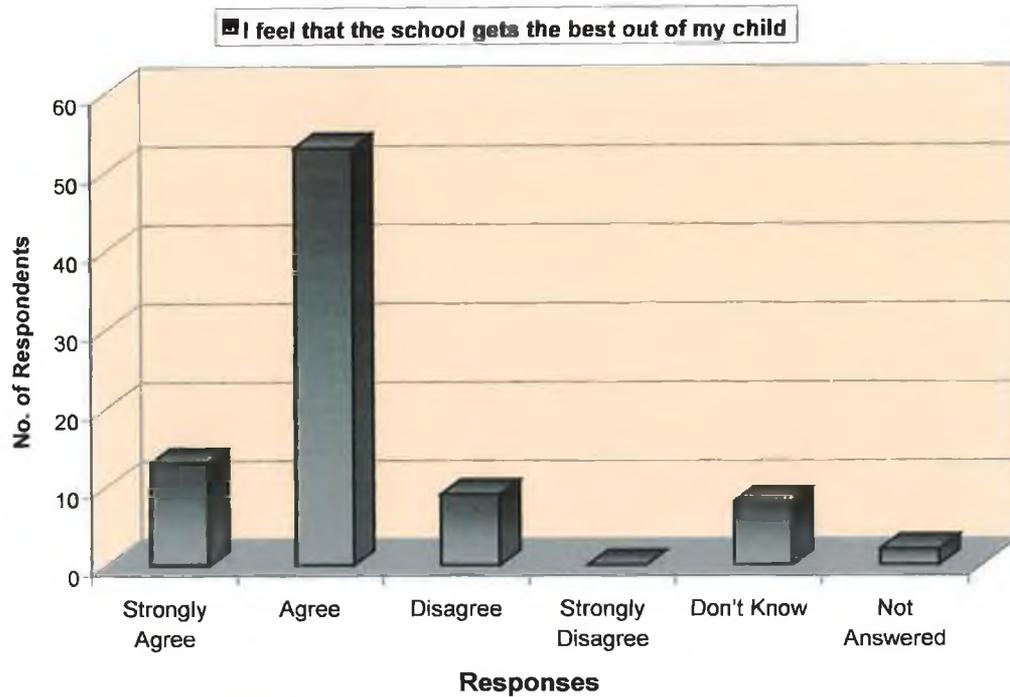


Figure 1 - The School Gets the Best Out of my Child (N = 85)

Of parents surveyed, a large majority (eighty-nine per cent) indicated that they felt that there were enough opportunities for them to become involved in the life of the school. This finding is interesting in the light of research cited in Carey¹²⁹ where schools that work well with families have higher ratings of teachers by parents. One parent wrote:

The teachers are very helpful. The school gives you great confidence and is always ready to help. I wouldn't change anything in [Scoil Eoin]¹³⁰

(Mother of child in Senior Infants)

This comment contrasts somewhat with Hanafin and Lynch's¹³¹ findings where parental involvement with the class teacher was commonly spoken about as inadequate, difficult, off-putting, excluding and frightening. The

¹²⁹ Carey, Olmscheid (1999) "Parental Involvement: An Essential Ingredient". Accessed from <http://www.ericfacility.net/teams/Search.do?action=102>

¹³⁰ pseudonym

¹³¹ J. Hanafin and A. Lynch, "Peripheral Voices: Parental Involvement, Social Class, and Educational Disadvantage", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 23, 2002, No. 1.

communities in that study were disadvantaged while the school in this study serves a community, which has a more heterogeneous profile in terms of class. However, it is in line with Philipsen's¹³² findings that the degree and nature of parental involvement differ drastically between schools and even within schools.

However, of parents surveyed, the majority of them (eighty-three per cent) would like to know more about their child's progress. This is clearly an area where parents would like to see an improvement.

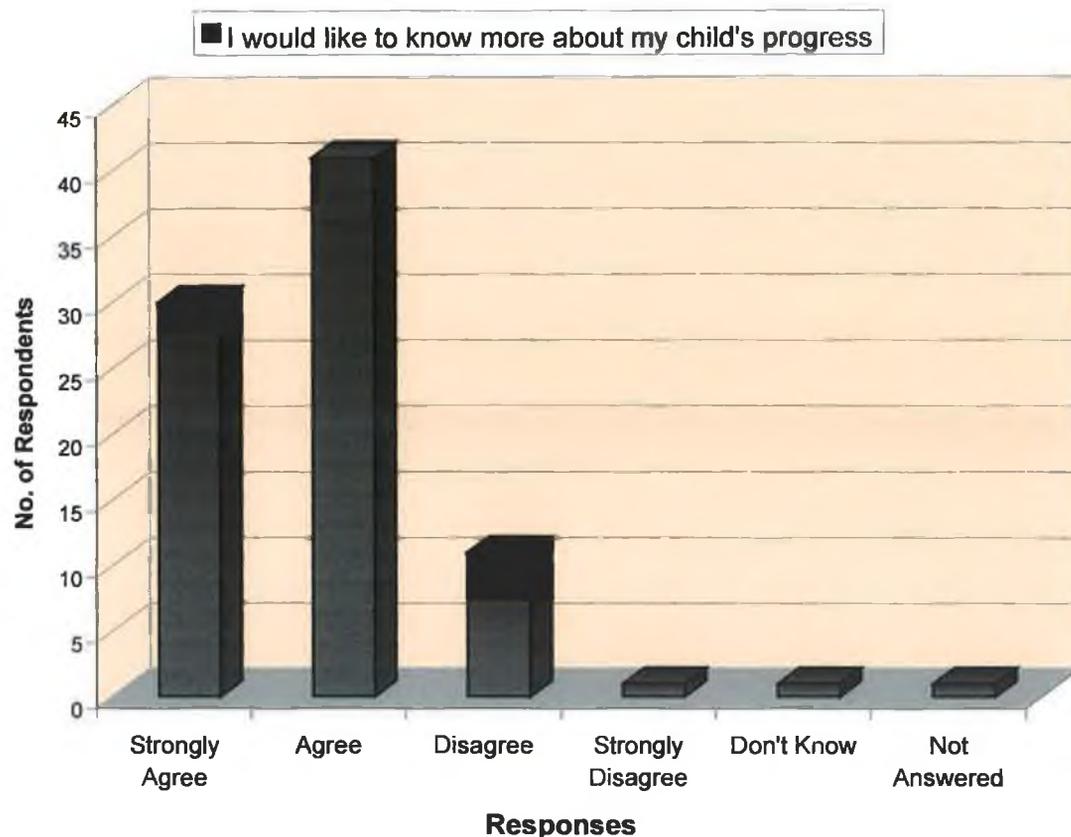


Figure 2 - More Information on Child's Progress (N = 85)

A large majority of parents feel well informed about the school (eighty-nine per cent) but there is ambivalence here with almost half (forty two per cent)

¹³² Maïke Philipsen, "Parental Involvement in School: In Search for Socially Situated Understanding". Accessed from: <http://www.ericfacility.net/teams/Search.do?action=102>

registering the fact that they would like more information from the school. This could reflect a media-fed public thirst for information on school academic achievement, highlighted at post-primary level during recent, public, political discourse on league tables. An increasingly well-educated parent body is seeking accountability and information from all sectors of the public service and education is no different in this respect.

The former could represent satisfaction with the monthly newsletter and other formal and informal communications with the school and the teachers. Responses to another statement in Section 1 and to the open-ended questions in Section 3 indicate that the dissatisfaction around information from the school relates to specific information regarding progress of individual children. There is an expressed desire for more specific information on individual children and their progress. While it could also represent the fact that some parents do not check their children's bags and may fail to get important messages on time or at all, none of the comments support this.

There were seventy-one responses to the question seeking to discover the source of most satisfaction among parents, representing 83% of respondents. However, while some respondents limited themselves to 'one best thing that the school does' others incorporated two or three different strengths into one sentence. There were fifty-six responses to the question seeking to find out what parents would most like to see changed. Of these comments it is significant that eight people wrote that they would not change anything. This means that the real number of respondents seeking change is forty-eight (out of a total of eighty-five questionnaires returned). The smaller number of

responses in relation to the second question is in keeping with a general satisfaction among parents.

The source of most satisfaction reported by parents is the school's holistic approach to their children. In response to the question 'what, in your opinion, is the best thing that this school does?' the category with the largest number of comments (24%) relates to the social development of their children through a holistic approach. One mother wrote that the best thing was:

It [the school] does its best to ensure the 'all-round' development of each child and tries to involve everybody concerned i.e. parents and the wider community in this practice.

(Mother of child in 1st Class)

This comment highlights how the second source of satisfaction, parental involvement, is linked to the first. Almost the same number of parents (twenty-three per cent) identifies the school's encouragement of parental involvement as the best thing that the school does. Parents praise and support activities organised by the Parents' Council and/or Home School Community Liaison, class teams and individual class teachers. One mother expressed it like this:

...the school's open policy in encouraging parents to partake in school activities and in classrooms and the positive interaction with both teacher and parents. It provides a great foundation for communication and understanding for all parties involved.

(Mother of child in Senior Infants)

Parents have also indicated satisfaction with extra-curricular activities. It is interesting to note that what parents are calling 'extra-curricular activities' are

actually *curricular activities*. Reference has been made to field trips, swimming, drama, percussion, and *activities*, which are part of the curriculum and happen within school hours. It seems that parents are happy with an approach to learning that is becoming increasingly active and varied. I have included the use of computers in this category also for this reason. Three parents from one class identified access to computers as the thing the school does best. It so happens that there are three computers in that classroom with a teacher who uses them to develop literacy and numeracy. All other classrooms have only one computer with many teachers unfamiliar with software and lacking the skills or confidence to use them to the same degree.

While a number of parents' comments (9%) identify communication with the home as a strength of the school, it is clear from responses to the other open-

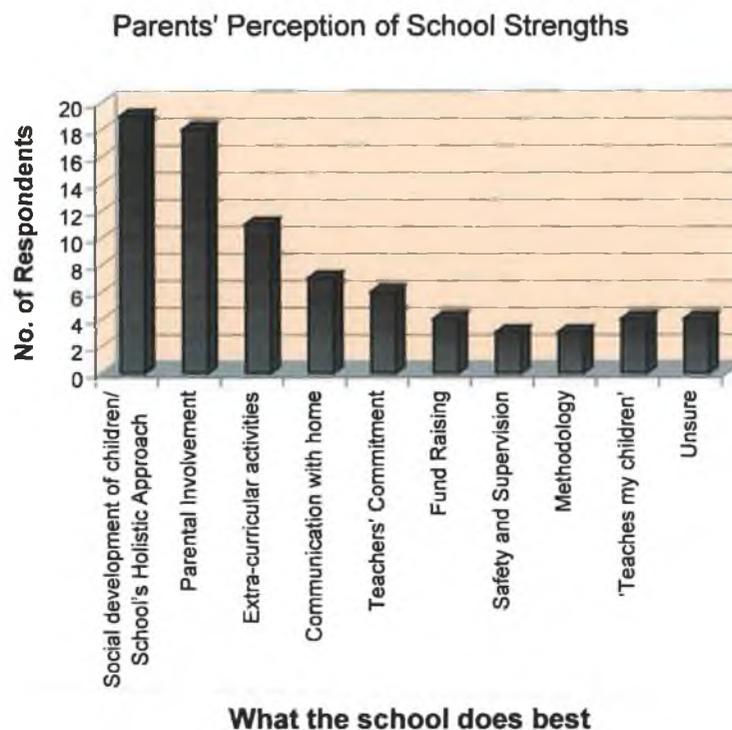


Figure 3 - Parents' Perception of School Strengths (N = 71)

ended question that parents are not getting the *specific* information in relation to the progress of their children that they require and they are not getting it frequently enough.

Six parents (8%) identified teacher commitment as a strength of the school. Fund-raising, safety and supervision were also identified as things that the school does best. Two parents wrote that it was difficult to comment on what the school does best since their first child had only spent 10 weeks there. One of them wrote the following:

This is my first experience of having a child in school but the one thing that strikes me is the attitude of ...[the principal] and the teachers and the way everything is centred around the children – very different to how it was in my day.

(Mother of a Junior Infant)

4.2.2.2 Source of Most Dissatisfaction

The graph shows the categories of dissatisfaction that emerged from 48 comments.

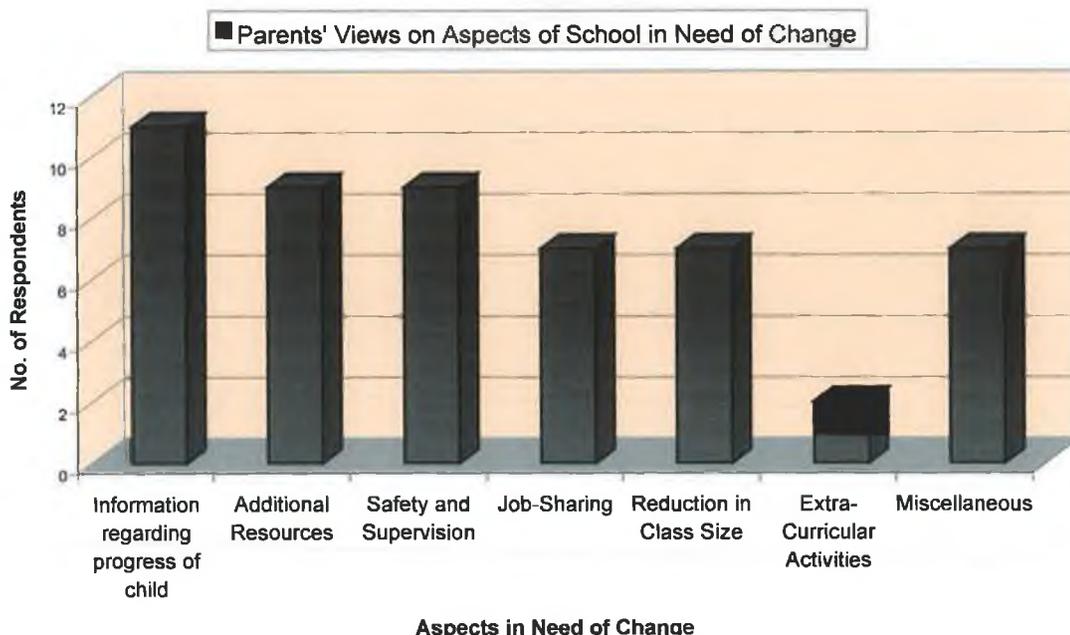


Figure 4 - Parents Views on Aspects of School in Need of Change (N = 48)

A significant number of comments (one fifth) relate to a requirement for more frequent and specific information regarding the progress of their children. Most of these are from parents of junior infants and more in need of reassurance perhaps, than parents of older children. However, it is clear from Section 1 of the questionnaire that the general body of parents (eighty five per cent) would like this information.

The comments relating to additional resources vary from a place to wait in between collecting a child that finishes school at 1.40 pm and one that finishes an hour later, to car parking facilities. Individual tuition for children who need it and more teacher assistants were among the other suggestions for resources.

Safety and supervision is obviously a priority for parents. They have concerns about bullying during school time and they have concerns about safety between the time children are dismissed and the time they are collected from school. Parents in this survey identified more supervision of children as a way of counteracting bullying behaviour.

Teachers who are job-sharing¹³³ teach one of the classes in the survey. This arrangement ran into difficulties when one of the teachers became ill and a series of substitute teachers (eight in total) was employed every other week.

One parent commented on the general feeling among parents:

¹³³ Job-sharing has been a feature of the school's employment structure since the school participated in the pilot project in 1998. This year, teachers who are job-sharing are teaching two classes in the school.

'Substitute teachers' when teacher is on long-term sick leave, parents are unhappy with a variety of substitute teachers, lack of homework or continuity of work. Does job-sharing work? My child is four years in Scoil Mhuire. This year was the first time I had an incident (with bullying). When I approached the school I had to wait five days to speak to the teacher (P.S. This is the first time I am concerned re. my child. All teachers to date in Scoil Eoin¹³⁴ – fantastic people)

Another parent wrote that she 'didn't agree with job-sharing' and another 'would like to see the school address the policy on 'job-sharing' contracts and what the position is when one teacher is unable to fulfil her part of the contract'.

Almost half of the comments written from this cohort of parents were in relation to job-sharing and these comments were the longest. However, while parents are identifying job-sharing as the 'problem', the teachers concerned are unequivocal that a single student with a serious behavioural problem is the reason none of the substitute teachers would remain to cover the sick leave¹³⁵.

¹³⁴ A pseudonym is being used to preserve anonymity.

¹³⁵ When first introduced, the job-sharing scheme could only involve two permanent teachers *both based in the same school*, sharing a full-time post on a 50:50 basis. A scheme (known as *intra school job sharing*) now also exists on a pilot basis, which allows permanent teachers in two different schools to job share.

Boards of Management are required to develop a policy on job sharing specific to the needs of the particular school so that staff may be fully aware of the Board's position in this matter. In framing a policy position on job sharing, Boards are required to ensure that the welfare and educational needs of pupils take precedence over all other considerations. As soon as a Board of Management has decided to allow job sharing, parents should be informed that their child(ren) will be taught by job sharing teachers in the relevant school year. A Board is required to notify parents at the earliest possible opportunity by way of a special meeting called by the Principal/Board of Management. Teachers whose job sharing applications have been approved by a Board are required to attend such a meeting.

The principal has informed me that in the first year, this meeting had a very high attendance by parents, (ninety-eight per cent) but that attendance at subsequent meetings reduced considerably with about one-third of parents having attended the meeting for the current school year.

4.2.3 Parental Priorities

The top priority for parents for their children at this stage of development is that their children develop self-confidence. The next priority is clearly that their children are happy in school. The third priority, related to the first two is good self-esteem. Good behaviour and learning to read share equal weighting as the fourth priority.

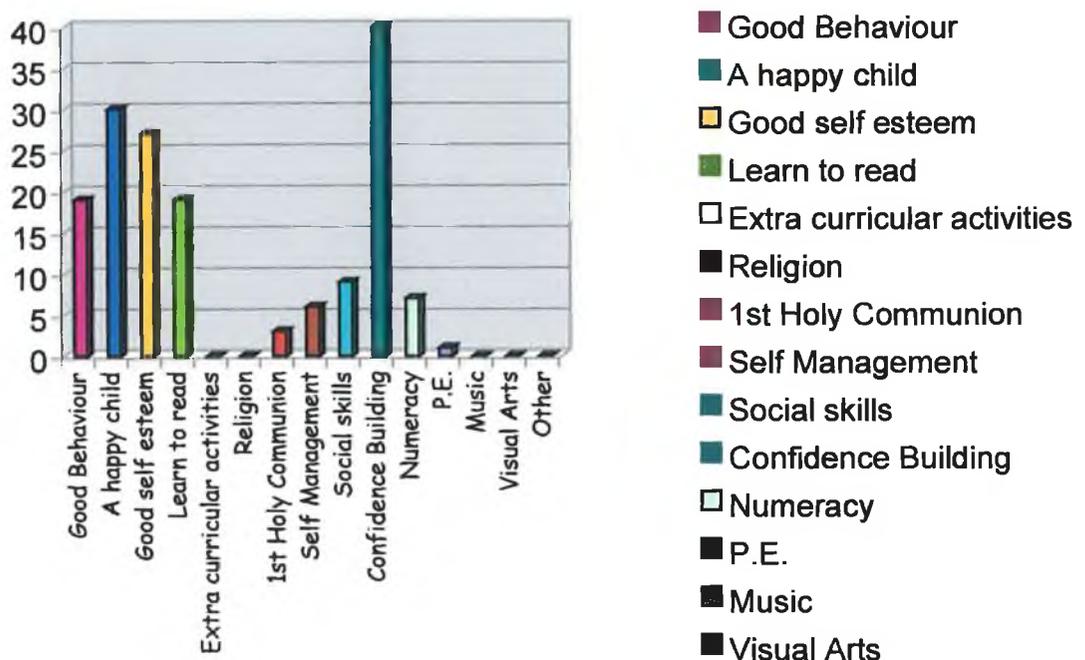


Figure 5 - Parental Priorities (N = 85)

4.3 Effects of Parental Involvement:

4.3.1 Positive Consequences of the Involvement

I have noted some positive consequences.

Firstly, from comments made, I understand that parents had some of their needs met. They identified, for example, that they had acquired knowledge regarding the relative progress of their own child, and gained insights into

classroom dynamics. Parents said that they could see improvements in the children's work over the period. Two of the volunteers are pursuing careers in childcare and gained some classroom experience.

Secondly, I found that I had the practical help and support I needed to manage diverse needs and abilities. Parents were able to provide immediate help and feedback to the children in their group, as they needed it. This meant less frustration and more application to the task on the part of the children.¹³⁶ I was pleased that those parents gained insights into the process of writing¹³⁷ and other classroom processes, insights that could possibly have long-term benefits for the school in terms of increased awareness leading to increased support.

Thirdly, I observed the children's needs being met. I saw them experience more quality, personal interactions with an adult. The adults took pleasure in the variety of responses and used their parenting skills to divide their time as equally as they could. The children had the opportunity to talk about and write their ideas on a topic with immediate on-going support.

Fourthly, parents acquired a more sophisticated understanding of the diversity and complexity of classroom dynamics, which seemed to increase their support. Relationships strengthened with increased mutual understanding.

¹³⁶ The class is normally organised in mixed ability groups. For the second project, I arranged the class in ability groups and undertook to support the most needy children myself. It was so satisfying to be able to address their needs in a meaningful way.

¹³⁷ The process of drafting, editing and redrafting a piece of writing represents a significant change in the way writing is being done in primary schools with the implementation of the revised curriculum of 1999. My colleague and I explained this process to volunteers at the volunteer workshop.

Volunteers were also exposed to the daily practical and moral dilemmas facing teachers.

4.3.2 *Negative Consequences of Classroom Involvement*

There has been a downside to the involvement. I have experienced increased workload in planning and preparing for the involvement.



Photo 3 – Parent - Child Interactions

Also much time is needed for planning and communicating with parents. The management of more relationships requires more energy and

confidence in what you are doing, which isn't always there. I feel I have to have a word for everyone at the door of the classroom. I must remember when a parent's baby is due, remember to congratulate a father on the birth, enquire about a sick parent (a child's grandparent) respond appropriately when a child accompanied by the parent is fifteen minutes late for class, as usual. This natural, enjoyable aspect can be paradoxically, energy depleting and enriching at the same time. These normal, social interactions could take up quite a bit of time in the morning but I had to seize all the opportunities I could to develop relationships that would ultimately benefit the children. It meant that I was less available to focus on the children and their concerns at this time.

I found I was less likely to experiment or change course when there was a parental audience where I knew I would not have time to explain the rationale for such a change. The lack of time to articulate what you are doing and why or to interpret what parents are seeing in the classroom can result in parents having snap-shot views of the classroom that can be skewed and misleading.

Some children resented the incursion on their structured activity time. Individuals would ask if 'the Mammies' were coming in the next day and show disappointment if they were. Questioning revealed why this was so. For a six-week period, structured activities were suspended on the two mornings that parents spent in the classroom. One mother told me that her son definitely did not enjoy her presence in the classroom. This she interpreted as resentment of the extra pressure she would put on him to behave and do his work. Towards the end of the project it seemed to me, from comments that were being made, that many of the *boys* were beginning to resent the restrictions to general freedom that the presence of the parents imposed.

There are also likely to be other unpredictable, short-term and long-term positive and negative consequences. Lareau¹³⁸ highlights an important negative consequence of parental involvement in general. It is one that is largely unexplored by proponents of parental involvement. It is that increased well-intended pressure brought to bear on children to improve their educational performance can result in conflict in families. This was borne out

¹³⁸ Annette Lareau, *Home advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, (Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998)

by the afore-mentioned mother's comment. Elkind and Suransky¹³⁹ have also focused on the negative consequences for children 'when parents and teachers vigorously promote educational attainment.'

4.4 Teacher Perspectives:

4.4.1 *Teacher Accountability*

One of the reasons having parents in the classroom is difficult is the issue of accountability. I believe it is a central issue. During the second project in my classroom I (privately) lamented the fact that I did not have time to explain to parents why I took certain decisions e.g. why I permitted that boy to type his work on the computer and not your son, who had completed his assignment to an even better standard? I was concerned that I might lose parents' support if they interpreted what they were seeing as a lack of fairness. In addition, some decisions a teacher makes are justifiable on broad social or self-esteem grounds and may not be justifiable on academic grounds. Sarason¹⁴⁰ declares:

Unless parents are made more knowledgeable about classroom dynamics, and alerted to the predictability and complexity of those dynamics, and the *moral-educational tightrope* on which the teacher is walking, you are asking for trouble. (my emphasis)

However, insofar as parents felt free to speak their minds during the review meeting, and I believe they did, to a large extent, it would appear that my concerns were largely unfounded. It seemed to me that the parents had

¹³⁹ Elkind and Suransky in Annette Lareau, *Home advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, (Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989) p.165.

¹⁴⁰ Seymour Sarason, *Parental Involvement and the Political Principle*, (CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995) p.79.

acquired a more sophisticated understanding of classroom dynamics and were in admiration of the patience and skill they saw evidenced and were calling for a reduction in class size.

For people who have work commitments or whatever, they miss out on so much. I think a lot of people might not, who maybe can or may not have the time to do it, or can't bring themselves to do it, for whatever reason; If they could get insights into what actually goes on in classrooms, I think it would make a huge difference to them.

The same parent acquired a new understanding of how class size impacts on a teacher's ability to meet individual needs:

I think when you see a group of twenty odd children, it really brings home how important it is to keep numbers down...it made it very clear to me that we should all be pushing for that more... at that age they demand so much individual attention, don't they?

(Mother of boy in 1st Class)

In relation to application to tasks, they commented on the gender differences they observed and the value of their involvement as they perceived it.

I think the one thing that would encourage you is .(eh)...when you think back to six weeks ago, ...the whole thing kinda comes together, and when you see the progress they make...suddenly the writing becomes more uniform...it's very encouraging.

(Mother of boy in 1st Class)

You can even see the difference in the kids from week one to week six...a big improvement, even in their own way that they go on...

(Mother of girl in 1st Class)

One mother spoke of the difference she perceived between the girls' and boys' application to the task.

The girls were a lot more focused...more into doin' the writin'...they'd write it an' rewrite it...[the boys' attitude was] 'I've done the headin' – what more d' you want?

(Mother of girl in first class)

Parents wondered how it was possible to *teach* such a diverse, lively, noisy, group for the entire day. One boy's mother felt it should be compulsory for every parent to spend time in the classroom to discover how challenging teaching is, a view put forward by Sarason¹⁴¹, albeit facetiously. He states that, at the very least, it would educate the public to what a teacher is confronted with, day in, day out, year in, year out but also suggests that it could raise the level of discussion about where and what kinds of changes we should be thinking about in our efforts to 'improve' our schools.

The same parent learned that engaging a large number of diverse individuals of that age group in a learning activity is difficult.

The one thing I noticed the last day was... you're moving from corner to corner, [of a group's table] you take your eye off the ball, so to speak, and somebody's gone or whatever...It's so hard to keep...and I'm just trying to quantify that against what you have with twenty odd people...just trying to get them all focused...it must be a (pause) nightmare.

(Mother of 7year old boy)

Another parent expressed her exasperation as follows:

¹⁴¹ Seymour Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*, 2nd Edition, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982) p.121.

I just don't know how you...I just couldn't ...I feel like...I don't know how you hold your patience.

(Mother of 7year old girl)

Another mother intercepted to announce that she intends bringing in a rope to tie certain individuals to their seats next time! This revelation was greeted with great mirth and other expressions of what individuals would like to do to ensure compliance.¹⁴²

In response to a request for any further comments or observations one mother summed up the tone of the review meeting when she said:

We just think you're wonderful people! You have your hands full.

(Mother of 7 year old, in a different class)

4.4.2 Parent - Teacher Partnership

Much has been made of the notion of 'partnership' between teachers and parents but Macbeth¹⁴³ highlights that 'quite trivial and subservient parental actions may be paraded as educational partnership'. He finds it curious that much of the writing on home-school partnership projects emphasises ways of developing 'more *equal* relationships between the home and school'. He suggests that if one equates education with schooling, then it is questionable whether parents *could* be equal partners with teachers, since they are unlikely to possess the same level of skills, knowledge and expertise. On the other hand, if schooling is seen as part of education, he suggests that teachers are

¹⁴² It strikes me that the mothers are bringing standards of compliance from their own childhood experiences of school to this classroom. The class group was never as *engaged* in a whole class activity as they were when these parents were in and were quiet and well behaved. However, I do encourage proactivity, initiative and thinking and try to accommodate and encourage the children's individuality as a matter of priority.

¹⁴³ Alastair Macbeth in Pamela Munn, (ed.) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.39.

likely to be *junior* partners. If 'junior' is to be interpreted as less important in terms of the role, it seems to me that in terms of accountability, the junior partner is held more accountable, as things stand. Macbeth¹⁴⁴ points out that more than eighty-five per cent of a child's waking (and therefore potentially learning) life from birth to sixteen is spent outside school.

Lareau¹⁴⁵ comments that teachers want parents to be unconditionally positive about the teacher in their interactions with their children. I note that I want that too, in the sense that I want parents and their children to believe that at all times my intentions are to inspire learning and well-being in their children. I want parents to practice Lareau's 3 Rs, that is, read, reinforce the curriculum and respond to my requests. I also want them to respect my advice and actions and to respect and defer to my expertise, like the teachers in Lareau's study. I don't want parents in the school monitoring my decisions because I have not the time to explain or explore the rationale for such decisions around which there could be confidentiality issues. Also, the decisions I might make might not be good ones or they might have unpredictable, negative outcomes or they might be courageous experiments on my part and I am not ready for an audience. The point is, in my experience, what teachers want is something *akin* to partnership but not quite partnership.

If, however, partnership means a shared commitment to means and ends, a joint understanding of the realistic and attainable goals for individual pupils,

¹⁴⁴ Alastair Macbeth in Pamela Munn, (ed.) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.39.

¹⁴⁵ Annette Lareau, *Home advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, (Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989).

how these are to be achieved and the respective parts which teachers, parents and pupils will play in this process, then it is a useful term.

Bastiani¹⁴⁶ refers to a new ideology which 'stresses the complementary nature of parent and teacher roles, the need to recognise important differences between them and to confirm parental strengths, in a spirit of co-operation'. One of the important differences, it seems to me, is that a teacher has an obligation to attempt to meet the educational needs of *all* students while a parent is focussed on one.

Macbeth¹⁴⁷ draws attention to the need for a 'paradigm shift' on the part of teachers if they are to work more effectively with parents. But a paradigm shift is also needed for parents. In some instances it seems as if parents are failing to recognise the legitimacy and value of their contribution to their children's schooling and to recognise the validity of their point of view. Parents do not appreciate how much learning happens outside the school, facilitated by them and other adults in the child's life. Sometimes they fail to recognise that they are the ones who know their children best and are possibly the most influential adults in their children's lives. This may not be the case where adults are spending very little quality time in the company of their children.

¹⁴⁶ John Bastiani, in Pamela Munn, (ed.) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.39.

¹⁴⁷ Alastair Macbeth, in *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* ed. (London: Routledge, 1993) p.175.

4.4.3 *Alterations in Power and Professional Autonomy*

With regard to the child in the school, parents and educators have been unequal in the possession and exercise of power. However, Sarason¹⁴⁸ declares that what is at stake here, is not power in and of itself, but the concrete ways in which alterations of power will in turn alter the ecology of classrooms, schools and their surrounding communities.

I have not *felt* any alterations in power and professional autonomy that I would attribute to maternal involvement in the classroom. There has been a general erosion over the years of the power and autonomy teachers have experienced during their careers. This has happened for a range of reasons, including a decrease in status brought about partly by a more educated population and the knowledge explosion. However, I would not interpret mothers using their common sense in the classroom as 'taking liberties'. I observed a mother separating a child from the group she was working with because the child was distracting the other members of the group. I interpreted this as a mother using her common sense. I am aware that other teachers might view such an act as stepping outside her role as a parent. I am also conscious that the parents of that child might themselves have a difficulty with that parent, a person, whom they do not know, taking such a disciplinary action against their child. There are many possibilities for conflict. This particular example points to the need for a clear understanding among volunteer parents as to the school's policy and procedures in relation to

¹⁴⁸ Seymour Sarason, *Parental Involvement and the political principle*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995)

promoting positive behaviour and the sanctions that are applied for non-compliance.

My awareness and understanding around this issue has grown in recent years coinciding with my own children beginning school. I have experienced as a parent the direct 'No Parents Beyond this Point' and the many subtle but powerful ways that the culture of some schools promote non-involvement by parents. Working closely with a teacher who has recently vacated the Home School Community Liaison position in the school has provided useful insights together with the current study undertaken by the author. I have come to believe that, in the main, parents know their children best and a teacher must listen to them and hear the insights they have to offer, in the interests of the children. The disagreements I have had with parents in relation to curriculum have worked themselves out through genuine communication and a willingness to be flexible.

4.5 Individual versus Collective Rights:

4.5.1. *Diversity of Needs*

When the children of first class came to the classroom on the first day of term, I made a point of engaging with as many parents as possible on that first morning. I did this for as long as it took for parents and children to feel comfortable that their particular concerns would be listened to and responded to, if not immediately, in due course. For some, this was all that was necessary. When parents got a sense that I had their children's best interests at heart, they were happy to let me 'get on with it'. For others, it was not so

straightforward. It seemed that the more I listened, the more a few individuals sought my attention for quite trivial things. I became more acutely aware of the delicate balance between making oneself available to parents and balancing the rights and needs of other parents and the children.

I was committed to integrating one of those children with cerebral palsy, transferring from a special school, who had to enter the building via a temporary ramp, which had to be laid each morning. I was aware that she had to transfer from the wheelchair in the small porch, to her walker to make the short walk to her special chair in the classroom. I was aware of her mother's dismay and frustration that a permanent ramp had not been provided for safe, easy access for her daughter. My field notes record early dissatisfaction with my performance:

On the third of September, [the parent of the child with cerebral palsy] complained to the principal that her daughter is last out every evening. She was also unhappy about a number of other small things that could be solved immediately. I wished [mother of child] had come to me about it. I felt betrayed and annoyed particularly having had a long meeting with her, (several hours) prior to her daughter coming to this school. I thought she understood how committed I was to integrating [her daughter].

I was made aware, by the parents of the second new student, that their daughter is an elective mute. They gave me the relevant reports and recommendations from her last school. This class has been chosen for the third new student because his parents requested that he be placed in his cousin's class. They further requested on the first morning that he sit next to his cousin, to which I readily agreed. Two days later, the parents of his cousin showed concern that their daughter was sitting next to her cousin who

they described as 'hyperactive'. Her mother would prefer if they were not sitting together lest her daughter's behaviour be negatively affected. It transpired that while they were willing to share such concerns with me, they hadn't shared them with the parents of the 'hyperactive' child, their relatives. It seemed that they expected that I would arbitrate in what was a family 'problem'.

The following is an extract from field notes:

Another parent said that his daughter's arm is being squeezed on the yard and that she is upset about it. I assured the parent that I would look into it but that day I was on duty all day in a yard away from my own class.¹⁴⁹ The child in question never mentioned it and I forgot about it by home time. At 3.20pm. that afternoon, the principal received a phone-call from that parent complaining that I had not listened to him¹⁵⁰. The girl herself did not complain to me at any stage nor did she show any sign of upset. When I engaged with her, on the following day, she responded airily, saying that the girl who is squeezing her likes her and lifts her up by her waist.

The incident, it seemed, from my perspective, and possibly also from the perspective of the child the next day, had been blown out of all proportion in the mind of the parent. There appeared to have been insufficient family discussion on the matter. I was provided with the name of the child who was reportedly 'bullying' her (it turned out to be the wrong name) and spent some time trying to locate the other child and sort it out. The parent who had complained made an appointment with the principal to discuss this and made two other phone-calls to the principal in advance of the arranged meeting.

¹⁴⁹ The school was being renovated at the time and staff and children had to relocate to pre-fabs while work was being carried out in the classrooms. Increased vigilance was required on the yard because of hazards associated with the refurbishment. The play area was significantly reduced and children in first and second classes were sharing the same play area.

¹⁵⁰ There is an irony here because I had just finished reading Atkins, Bastiani and Goode's 'Listening to Parents' and was making a virtue out of listening to parents, at the time!

The parent did not present for the meeting and it was some time before I met him again. I enquired in a general way if all was well with the child and apparently it was. My field notes record a resentment of the time wasted on what I perceived to be a non-incident and a resolve to be less available to that individual.

These experiences highlight for me a couple of things of which I was unaware, up until now. I had believed that parental involvement was an unmitigated good. Bastiani¹⁵¹ highlights an untapped resource, which I had always been keen to tap into. On the one hand, an experienced, highly motivated teacher, committed to parental involvement finds herself, quite quickly becoming de-motivated, demoralised, exhausted and stressed in attempting to alleviate all parents' sometimes conflicting concerns. These concerns have been warranted and unwarranted, communicated both directly and indirectly.

On the other hand, there appears to be an individualistic culture¹⁵², focused on securing individual rights without any understanding that *their* child's needs may not be the priority for that day and that there is a bigger, more complex picture. The balance seems to be heavily in favour of individualism with little understanding that the collective good impacts favourably on all individuals. McGrath and Kuriloff¹⁵³ who have examined involved parents

¹⁵¹ John Bastiani, *Working with Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1989) p.12.

¹⁵² Rosalind Edwards and Pam Alldred, "A Typology of Parental Involvement in Education Centring on Children and Young People: negotiating familialisation, institutionalisation and individualisation", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 21, 2000, No. 3. pp. 435-455, p.440.

¹⁵³ D. McGrath, and P. Kuriloff, " 'They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place': Upper-Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children" in *Educational Policy*, Vol.13, 1999, pps. 603-629.

intentions regarding school suggest that administrators attempt to counteract this individualistic culture by becoming educators to the broader system. They believe that administrators 'must find effective ways to stress to all school constituents their responsibility to all children and to the larger community.' They also believe that administrators must 'take as one of their central missions the task of continuously teaching parents about the benefits of having schools in which all children succeed.'

4.5.2. Parental Involvement and Children with Disability

My field notes at the beginning of the year reveal a portrait of myself as a teacher who is stressed, exhausted and getting very little job satisfaction. Several pages were written in the middle of the night! I have recorded my emotions to enable me to identify bias in my deliberations¹⁵⁴.

I wish the permanent ramp would be built soon. I am sure the lack of it is symbolic, in [parent's] mind of all the ways I am not meeting [name of child with physical disability] needs. I feel as if she is watching every little thing I do and probably misinterpreting it.

Interestingly, at that stage, it seemed to me that, as a teacher, whatever I did, I was not going to be able to keep the parents happy. Their children seemed very content indeed, but this other group, that I was committed to involve, listen to and with whom I aimed to power-share, could not be satisfied.

¹⁵⁴ Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education – An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, (London: Allyn and Bacon Inc., 1982) p.132.

I have come to some conclusions about this. One is in relation to parents of children who transfer from special schools to so-called mainstream schools. Firstly, there are particular issues with mothers, who have been devoting their lives, (perhaps obliged to do so, in the sense that it is difficult or impossible, to get child-care for children with particular categories of special needs) to the care of their special needs children. They have encountered many bureaucratic and other barriers in securing their children's entitlements and I suspect, have come to distrust public institutions.

Secondly, Yanoff¹⁵⁵ highlights that some parents are in denial of their children's condition and believe that to be treated fairly, they must be treated in the same way as everybody else. My field notes record:

Today [the principal] showed me a letter written by [a parent] outlining criticisms relating to the treatment of [child with a disability]...was critical of the fact that I was getting [her child] to practice the formation of some letter of the alphabet while others were engaged in an activity. This was an opportunity I was using to assess [the child's] progress in penmanship (which is one of my key learning objectives for [the child]) and at the same time provide some one-to-one tuition. I felt angry and betrayed.

As a teacher, committed to the integration of children with Special Needs, I found that I needed space and time to learn about the child with Special Needs and I needed encouragement and support. The criticisms from the parent were immediate and indirect. It highlighted for me the fundamental difference between the priorities of parent and teacher. For the parent, there is one priority, -her/his child. The teacher has a professional obligation to balance the needs of all of the children. While parents can say that they are

¹⁵⁵ Jerome Yanoff, *The Classroom Teacher's Inclusion Handbook* (Chicago: Arthur Coyle Press, 2000)

aware of this fact, they may not fully understand how it translates into practical realities. In addition to this, the social group that is the class, like the family, is an imperfect society and all needs are unlikely to be perfectly met, all of the time.

It is interesting to note that the Equal Status Act (2000)¹⁵⁶ includes an important exemption, in relation to meeting the needs of children with disabilities. This exemption aims to extend to certain situations where a student, because of his/her disability, would prove disruptive to a degree that would disrupt or negate the education of other students in the school. A parent who is in denial of the limitations her child's special needs may place unreasonable demands or burdens on child and teacher to achieve the unachievable or to achieve certain, measurable goals to the detriment of other children's less obvious needs. Related to this is that, while all can see the special needs of a child with a physical disability (and for this reason the physical needs *tend to* be met) children with psychological or other less obvious needs are also the priority of the teacher and these needs may be of even greater concern.

A parent with a special needs child who took part in the pilot study and who is involved in the parents' council of another school remarked that she felt she could predict a majority of negative responses to the questionnaire. 'Parents could never be happy with a school because a teacher is one individual and the needs are many and varied'. Balancing the rights and needs of so many

¹⁵⁶ Schools are now regulated by this Act, which aims to promote equality and prohibit types of discrimination, including discrimination on the grounds of disability.

children means, inevitably, in my view, that some rights or needs will be overlooked for a time at least.

Criticism of oneself as a parent or a teacher, I believe, is very difficult to accept. Both are very difficult, apparently never-ending jobs. One can always give more as a parent. One can always give more as a teacher.

Sarason¹⁵⁷ comments:

Constant giving in the context of constant vigilance required by the presence of many children is a demanding, draining, taxing affair that cannot easily be sustained. Even where it is sustained on a high level, it still does not always prevent guilt feelings because the teacher cannot give all that he/she feels children need.

It is this *giving* in the absence of *getting*, which encourages a routinized classroom that can reduce the demand for giving, but which may be neither terribly interesting nor exciting.

4.6. Managing Involvement

4.6.1 *Securing Meaningful Involvement*

Macbeth's¹⁵⁸ criticism of 'trivial and subservient' parental involvement has been mentioned in Chapter 2 and Sarason's assertion that what is important for realizing the spirit of involvement is the degree and quality of the mutual trust and respect characterizing it. The findings of this study are in line with

¹⁵⁷ Seymour Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*, 2nd Edition, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982) p.120.

¹⁵⁸ Pamela Munn, (ed.) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* (London: Routledge, 1993).

those of McGrath and Kuriloff¹⁵⁹ who suggest that administrators who want to expand the diversity of involved parents will need to perform active outreach. It wasn't enough that this school sent a formal note inviting parents to the annual class meetings in September. In fact, it wasn't enough that the meetings had been flagged a week before in the monthly newsletter. Even a personal note from the teacher inviting the parents using their first names and signing the note using the teacher's own first name wasn't enough in our experience. The *children* also needed to be made aware that a class meeting was planned and that their parents had been invited. They could then remind their parents on the eve of the meeting. This strategy along with the others was what worked in securing a high attendance. Telephoning parents whom you have not met at the start of the year to introduce one self is another successful way to break down communication barriers. In fact, ever more proactive and creative strategies may be required to successfully include disadvantaged excluded minorities like the Traveller Community.

Securing a high attendance is only part of it. Parents must have at least some of their expectations / needs met at this meeting. Bastiani¹⁶⁰ has discouraged the formality that tends to characterize such meetings and I agree that formality is not conducive to communication and I did what I could to have these as informal as possible.

¹⁵⁹ D. McGrath, and P. Kuriloff, " 'They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place': Upper-Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children" in *Educational Policy*, Vol.13, 1999, pps. 603-629.

¹⁶⁰ John Bastiani, *Working with Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1989) p.42.

During these classroom meetings, the standard school sheet requesting different kinds of help is distributed. However, in my experience, the poor response to this request is not a reflection of parents' lack of willingness to help. Parents *want* to be involved in whatever way they can. They do not want to be obliged to give a particular kind of help. They probably need time to think about the kind of help their particular circumstances will allow them to give. They will also need to be encouraged and reminded. They will need to have a fairly clear idea of the commitment involved.

My field notes record a general anxiety and unease among the staff in the days leading up to the parent-teacher meetings. It is heightened by the negative media attention surrounding post-primary, teacher-union negotiations with the Department of Education and Science in relation to parent-teacher meetings being held out of school hours. A staff member posted one such article on the staff-room notice board. Staff members have voted to 'get the meetings over with' in one day, rather than a series of half-days, so a day was allocated for it and teachers arranged to meet parents before and after official school times.

There is a general unease among staff this week as we prepare for the parent-teacher meetings and it is difficult not to be affected by the prevailing mood. Report cards have to be filled in advance of the meeting to be handed to parents on the day and discussed with them. [The principal] would like these to be sent to parents before the meetings. I understand this is to enable parents to be in a better position to discuss them. I agree with this standpoint but there is a strong feeling among staff that many parents will only come if they are obliged to come to collect a written report.

In answer to the question put by McGrath and Kuriloff¹⁶¹: Can schools gain the intended benefits of parent involvement without the downside of involved parents excluding other parents and using their influence to promote their own narrow self-interests? I definitely think so. However, I didn't have enough interaction with the parents to be aware of the deep dynamics between them but saw no evidence of it. The parents who became involved did not appear to know one another initially although one parent encouraged a friend who had a child in another class to become involved with my class. I believe that once principals, teachers and parents are aware that this is a possible and undesirable outcome of parental involvement, it can be at least minimised and even turned to the advantage of other parents¹⁶².

Barnett¹⁶³ highlights how traditional strategies to involve parents, such as inviting parents to meetings and school events, do not promote genuine interaction between home and school. Instead, she asserts, they separate parents and teachers. She outlines ways to increase communication:

- Informal, social meetings with parents
- Frequent positive phone-calls
- Newsletters which elicit feedback
- Home Visits

¹⁶¹ D. McGrath, and P. Kuriloff, " 'They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place': Upper- Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children" in *Educational Policy*, Vol.13, 1999, pp. 603-629, p. 624.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Barnett, Marion (1995) "Strengthening Partnerships by Reaching out to Families". Accessed from <http://www.ericfacility.net/teams/Search.do?action=102>

I have serious concerns about home visits, where uninvited visits could be experienced as an unwelcome invasion of a family's privacy. However, the idea of using frequent positive phone-calls is one I fully endorse, facilitated in this school by the installation of telephones in every classroom for the purpose of increasing communication. I must admit I have yet to call a parent with the sole purpose of communicating a positive message about a child. However, when I have sent positive messages on 'post-its' I have been surprised and delighted at the positive effect it has had on child and parent alike.

What is critical here, I think, is that teachers *believe* that parents want to be involved and that teachers *want* them to be genuinely involved knowing what the predictable consequences of that involvement will be. Then, they must perform active outreach to secure that involvement as a kind of antidote to the years of school cultures promoting non-involvement, either inadvertently or deliberately.

4.6.2 *Managing Maternal Involvement in Classroom Activities*

The five mothers who volunteered to help with literacy games in the classroom for six weeks during the first term said they enjoyed the experience. They said they were willing to be involved again. They were willing to share their experiences with other parents who might be interested. They found that the most difficult aspect of the project was securing and maintaining some children's interest and attention. Their accounts were lively, punctuated by the odd self-deprecatory remark. They had ideas about

what should be done to make it more interesting for the children and crucially they acquired *a more sophisticated understanding* of what it is like to be responsible for a large number of children with widely differing abilities, interests and needs. One mother commented:

To tell you the truth, I'd be walking out of the classroom at the end feeling sorry for you!
(Mother of child in 1st Class)

They were interested to see how their children were doing in comparison to other children. Another mother commented:

I thought my fellah was a genius until I saw what the others were capable of. I started putting a bit more pressure on him at home.
(Mother of child in 1st Class)

Not surprisingly, another mother voiced the opposite experience. The parents agreed that they were amused and entertained by the children's comments as they interacted with one another.

In analysing the projects from the teacher's point of view, the aspect that had most impact was finding the time to contact parents by telephone, the writing of follow-up letters, preparing and organising the workshop, informing parents of the workshop, and the communication involved in arranging a date that would suit most people. Time was also needed for arranging for parents' children to be suitably occupied while they engaged in the workshop, sourcing suitable literacy activities, adapting instructions on activities to ensure a step-

by-step guide for parents that would enable them to be clear in their instructions to the children.

The biggest challenge was when a volunteer parent or parents failed to turn up and a group (or groups) was left waiting, expectant. This happened a number of times during the first parent project for a variety of different reasons. One parent over-slept, another had a medical appointment that they had forgotten about. Another had an unexpected, serious, family illness and a child's illness prevented another mother from attending. A different group activity, had to be sourced quickly. It could not be the activity they were due to engage in the following day with a different parent. It had to be one that required no explanation. Without the help of an adult to mediate conflict, which invariably arose, the benefit to these groups was reduced and the whole purpose of the exercise was defeated. The teacher was supposed to be freed up to listen to reading and provide one-to-one tuition. I found I was unable to do this because parents found it difficult to sustain the interest of individual children who had neither the skills nor the desire to continue playing. I either ended up taking a group where a parent failed to turn up or taking the same children who were not co-operating with the parent at their table.

Another challenge was *managing* this extra group of individuals. I wanted their first experience of classroom involvement to be a positive one. It is interesting that it was their *first* experience since ninety per cent of parents who responded to the questionnaire indicated that there were enough

opportunities for them to become involved in the school. Why had they not become involved during the previous two years of their child's schooling? I suggest it was because parents need more encouragement than they were getting. Also, the experience of listening to children reading in the staff-room is quite a solitary one with little opportunity for having any of parents' own particular needs met. An identified parent requirement in this study is for more information relating to the relative progress of their children. This information is difficult to gather when a parent is in a one-to-one reading situation in the staff-room. Parents who have had this experience are unlikely to want to repeat it, in my view. While it is possible to gain insights into the general culture of the school through engagement in paired reading, (the staff-room can be a thorough-fare, at times) parents. They may have an opportunity to be present at school assembly, for example

Each mother had to be welcomed, introduced to the class and made as comfortable as possible with an adult chair to sit on. This was made difficult by the fact that some parents had younger children to escort to another part of the school and in an effort to reduce formality, my colleague and I had not emphasised the importance of being present punctually on the days one was volunteering. Some mothers were arriving after school start time and you were left wondering whether or not they were going to arrive. While this 'not knowing' caused problems, a teacher feels obligated, to mothers who are giving of their free time to help. The difficulty of biding one's time to see if individuals would turn up was exacerbated by a tendency in some children to

'show off' in front of mothers and exhibit behaviours that were as annoying as they were unexpected!

I was mindful of possible diverse reasons for parents becoming involved and I was keen that these 'needs' would be met. I wanted to ensure that parents had a diverse experience in terms of the groups they were with and that they would be with their own child's group at least once during the six weeks. Specifically, I wanted them to be motivated enough following the experience to want to repeat it.

Children whose parents were supposed to be present but who didn't arrive were left in an uncomfortable position. Sometimes, they weren't aware that their mother was expected in the classroom and had to field questions from classmates. Everybody learned who the 'unreliable' parent was. The parent who missed most of her timetabled volunteer days did not attend the review meeting and did not volunteer a second time. I would suggest that having her initial curiosity satisfied, her motivation to participate was reduced and managing her time around it appeared difficult for her. Explanations for her non-attendance were usually forthcoming afterwards. Relations with her continue to be good.

On the other hand, some were deeply committed. For example, one parent got news of the serious illness of a close family member but, despite this, only missed one slot and then let me know in advance.

It is worth stating also that there was a marked difference between the unease that characterised the atmosphere of the initial workshop and the relaxed, informality of the review meeting, where, I believe, parents felt reasonably comfortable about sharing their views and experiences. One or two characters tended to dominate but as a list of proposed questions were sent home in advance of the review meeting, (Appendix 2) some parents had actually written their answers on the sheet.

Interestingly, the second project did not encounter the problems of the first. It involved some of the parents who had been involved previously and some new volunteers. Two parents who had been involved were unable to commit a second time because of courses undertaken, one in Childcare and another as a Special Needs Assistant. This could be a clue as to why they became involved in the first place.

One parent remarked spontaneously on leaving the classroom after the first day of the second project: 'Oh! That was much better!' All the parents attended for nearly all of the days. The Special Needs Assistant agreed to be prepared to take a group if a parent was late or failed to appear. The children were organised in ability groups for the activity while I undertook to support the most needy and more demanding children.

The second project did not require the sourcing and preparation of diverse literacy activities while it did involve the children in an integrated reading, writing and oral language activity.

4.7. Summary of Findings:

The indications are that parents are broadly happy with the school. The top priority for parents for their children at this stage of development is that their children develop self-confidence. Clearly, the source of most satisfaction for parents is the school's holistic approach to their children, involving their social development and incorporating parental involvement that is almost entirely maternal.

Nearly one quarter of parents identify the school's encouragement of parental involvement as the best thing that the school does. Parents praise and support activities organised by the Parents' Council and/or Home School Community Liaison, class teams and individual class teachers. Parents have also indicated satisfaction with so-called 'extra-curricular' activities. Parents who reported *dissatisfaction* are dissatisfied with the lack of frequency and detail in relation to progress reports on their children.

Despite the fact that much time is needed for outreaching a diversity of parents, for the planning of parental involvement in the classroom, there are many immediate, observable positive consequences for parents, teachers and pupils with corresponding challenges. Among these, parental education in classroom dynamics and the work of the school is a valuable outcome for teachers and has an important implication for mutual accountability.

Chapter 5 Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion

5.1 Summary:

5.1.1 *The Study*

This dissertation presents the findings of an ethnographic study that analyses the constraining and enabling dynamics of parental involvement in a suburban, junior school. Data derives from a questionnaire, unstructured interviews with parents, and field notes based upon personal observations. The primary aim of this study was to make parental involvement a key process in improving learning in the classroom. Eleven parents volunteered to become involved in two different classroom projects. The author worked hard at making the various processes associated with *all* parents genuinely communicative. An attempt has been made to evaluate this work in terms of impact on parents, the children in the class and myself through my own observations and interviews with the involved parents.

5.2 Central Issues:

5.2.1 *Power*

Authors such as Vincent,¹⁶⁴ Wolfendale¹⁶⁵ and Sarason¹⁶⁶ have explored the complexities of power in the home-school relationship. Real parental involvement in schools requires that teachers be sensitive to issues of power

¹⁶⁴ Carol Vincent, *Parents and Teachers – Power and Participation*, (London: Falmer Press, 1996) pp.6-7.

¹⁶⁵ S. Wolfendale, *Empowering Parents and Teachers: Working for Children*. (London: Cassell, 1992)

¹⁶⁶ Seymour Sarason, *Parental Involvement and the Political Principle*, (CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995) pp.11-12.

and control, issues that must be recognised within the complexities of relationships within learning communities. Parent-teacher relationships have been characterised by power imbalances in the past and remains, in many cases. Alterations in traditional power relationships can be a painful unanticipated consequence of parental involvement and one that needs to be addressed during in-service. Teachers should consider why it is that altered power relationships are always problem producing.

5.2.2. *Barriers to Involvement*

From a parent perspective, classroom and / or school involvement can only happen if parents are available to be involved.¹⁶⁷ There are a variety of reasons why parents are not able to be involved or choose not to be involved. Performing active outreach to secure a diversity of involvement along a continuum of involvement from intense involvement at school/classroom level, to the option of non-involvement, seems like a possible forward.

School cultures have represented institutional barriers to involvement in the past, in addition to the professional barriers erected by teachers as they become socialised into a teaching culture.¹⁶⁸ In this case, parents are satisfied with the sense they are getting from the school that their help is required and valued. Parents are broadly happy with the school. They support parental involvement in it, which they view as one of the things that this school does best. However, they would like more detailed, specific, regular reporting on their children. It seems to me that the information they

¹⁶⁷ D. McGrath and P. Kuriloff, "They're Going to Tear the Doors Off This Place': Upper-Middle-Class Parent School Involvement and the Educational Opportunities of Other People's Children" in *Educational Policy*, Vol.13, 1999, pp. 603-629.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

require is immediately observable to them when they become involved in classroom work. They want to know how their child is in relation to other children, what classroom dynamics are like. Is their child getting fair play from teacher and classmates? Is their child able to stand up for himself/herself?

Involvement of parents in the classroom must be structured and planned and yields many benefits not least of which is the increased parental awareness of classroom dynamics and complexities. This, in turn, appears to raise the support of parents for teachers in the classroom.

5.2.3 *Consequences of Involvement*

In terms of the effects of parental involvement, the author suggests that there are both predictable and unpredictable consequences, short-term consequences and long-term consequences about which we can only speculate. Parents in the study indicated that they were having certain needs met such as the one outlined above. They also believed they were making a positive contribution to classroom management by their presence and could also see improvements in the children's written work. Some acquired classroom experience that they sought for courses they were doing.

From a teacher perspective, the author was pleased that there was an opportunity to talk about curriculum during the training session and observed benefits from a classroom management point of view and some gains (perhaps short-term) in terms of pupil outcomes.

5.2.4 *Accountability*

Accountability is *the* key issue in relation to classroom involvement for teachers. It seems to me similar to being accountable as a parent. It is the one aspect of the experience that strikes fear in the heart of this researcher. It seems impossible 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), and the state. Sarason¹⁶⁹ raises the question of what the obvious dangers are when only educators are held accountable. Teachers, who are solely accountable, are tending to conspire with abdicating parents¹⁷⁰ in perpetuating the myth that children's individual education needs are being met satisfactorily in classrooms, when this is clearly not possible and not the case.

5.2.5 *Teacher Education*

The policy of lifelong learning is regarded as a significant, historic landmark in the history of education and it is within this paradigm that teacher education must be conceived.¹⁷¹ Teacher education must therefore encompass pre-service education¹⁷² and in-career development. On-going professional development should be *de rigueur* among teachers as they seek to equip and motivate their students to be life-long learners.

¹⁶⁹ Seymour Sarason, *Parental Involvement and the Political Principle*, (CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995) p.79.

¹⁷⁰ This is not to criticise parents but to acknowledge that many parents are 'leaving it to the professionals' because there is a sense in which they have been led to believe that this is the right thing to do. It is also the case that it suits busy parents who *both* work outside the home to have somebody else take responsibility for this important work.

¹⁷¹ John Coolahan, "Teacher Education and the Teaching Career in an Era of Lifelong Learning", OECD Working Paper No.2. Accessed from: www.oecd.org/edu/workingpapers

¹⁷² An initial professional training could not be adequate for a career that can extend for forty years.

I agree with Sarason¹⁷³ when he states that talking to, and relating to parents, is one function that teachers are expected to, and do perform without any preparation whatsoever. He believes that technical proficiency is important in itself but must be accompanied by a moral, political and historical perspective so that teachers fully understand what is at stake. He¹⁷⁴ points to the need to flush out, and expose, teachers' over-learned attitudes derived from many sources and various experience, in order to make the acquisition of new stances in relation to parental involvement possible. He believes, and I concur, that two processes must occur, that of *un-learning* and *learning*.

I believe teacher education to be absolutely critical in involving parents in meaningful, power-sharing involvement. This education would involve teachers in considering and reflecting upon a range of fundamental issues in advance of planned, structured, involvement. The most important of these is a discussion on the *rationale* for such involvement, linked to a clear picture of the way things are, which is rooted in evidence and shared experience. During frank and open debate with colleagues, teachers' positions can be voiced and countered. This broad issue of accountability must be aired and discussed among teachers during ongoing discussions where teachers could get opportunities to voice legitimate concerns and hear the views and experience of others. The profile of parental involvement could be raised and teachers' own prejudices in relation to it could be interrogated.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*

Sarason¹⁷⁵ poses some important questions that need to be considered by teachers at this stage. He wonders by what rationale can one conclude that parents, and others, potentially possess assets that can contribute to substantive policy issues such as school organization and structure, curriculum, hiring, and school system relationships. He asks why parents should be as accountable for educational outcomes as educators. He wonders what educators should know about the demographic, religious, economic, vocational, and cultural characteristics of the community their school is in. He questions whether schools can continue to be encapsulated buildings containing encapsulated classrooms walled off from the realities of their communities.

For teacher proponents of parent involvement, it is important to explore the expectations around the involvement. Are they realistic? Teachers who believe that parental involvement is going to solve all the problems risk becoming disheartened very quickly, when they come face to face with a myriad of unanticipated consequences. Literature describing only the positive of such engagement can promote distorted views of what is possible.

Teacher education should also aim to make teachers aware of the ways in which school cultures have promoted and continue to promote non-involvement of parents. It should also focus on how socialization into the teaching profession can create a gulf between the professional and those he/she serves or is ultimately responsible to. More specifically, teachers

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

should reflect on whether the teaching profession is contributing to a situation in which the public today is beginning to view educators with diminishing respect, trust and competence. Teachers might consider why educators have done such a poor job in helping parents and others gain a more sophisticated comprehension of the problems and issues with which educators grapple.

Bastiani¹⁷⁶ points out 'that the willingness to listen to what parents are saying about their children's education and to be responsive to that is an important philosophical stance for teachers, based upon the right of parents, the importance of their support, and their value as an educational resource.' How to get teachers to adopt that philosophical stance is an interesting challenge!

Teacher education should involve reflection on why it is that parents *and* teachers both experience trepidation before parent teacher meetings and frustration afterwards. Why is this process failing to achieve what it ostensibly sets out to achieve? What are parents' expectations in relation to these meetings? What are teachers' expectations? How could these expectations become more realistic and the process become genuinely communicative for the benefit of all parties?

Teachers should spend time reflecting on the position of parents in relation to these meetings. Teachers' role must be extended to put in the extra concerted effort to improve attendance rather than accept poor attendance as the way things are. *Beliefs* seem to be at the centre of this. Teachers seem to *believe*

¹⁷⁶ John Bastiani, *Working with Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1989) p.21.

that parents who do not attend these meetings are disinterested in their children's education. The problem lies in the interpretation of the facts. I believe that most parents will do anything they *believe* to be in the best interests of their children, if they are in a position to do so. Attendance at a meeting where the child's and the parent's own inadequacies are relayed either explicitly or implicitly is one to be avoided. Equally, sitting through a boring, hour-long meeting where the benefits to their children are not immediately apparent is not going to be prioritised by a busy parent.

What are or will be the predictable problems that parents and educators will encounter in forging relationships of mutual trust and respect? Why are they predictable? Teachers should have the opportunity to consider what motivates parents to become involved in school activities and the importance for parents of having at least some of these needs met. They must also be alerted to the pitfalls associated with parental involvement, including the possibility of some parents seeking to use their involvement to secure a more favourable position in the school.

Management of the involvement and what it entails is another perspective, which should be part of teacher education. Teachers should be enabled to consider the personal toll on the teacher of maintaining two sets of relationships, in terms of skills and energy. They must be aware of the possible impact of a teacher's relationship with the parent on the parent/child relationship. There are particular issues in relation to parental involvement and children with disability or special needs. Teachers need to reflect on these and how best to approach them.

Macbeth¹⁷⁷ draws attention to the need for a 'paradigm shift' on the part of teachers if they are to work more effectively with parents. But a paradigm shift is also needed for parents. I recommend facilitated workshops where parents reflect on their role as 'the primary educators'¹⁷⁸ of their children recognise the legitimacy and the validity of their point of view and value their contribution to their children's schooling.

5.2.6 *Secure meaningful, diverse involvement*

Securing meaningful, diverse involvement requires initiating meaningful communication with parents, in the first instance. It further requires the performance of active outreach to involve as many parents as possible, particularly fathers, whose involvement tends to be largely symbolic. Parents should be involved in and therefore accountable at all levels of the school.

5.2.7 *Individual versus collective rights*

A teacher's responsibility to try to balance the rights of individual children against the collective rights of all the children in the class is a constant challenge and a key issue in the context of parental involvement. Parents who are involved in classroom activities will not be aware why a teacher is choosing a certain course of action above another. There is much scope for misunderstanding and conflict in this scenario but it can be greatly reduced by airing it in advance of parental participation.

¹⁷⁷ Alastair Macbeth, "Preconceptions about parents in education" in *Parents and Schools, Customers, Managers or Partners?* ed. Pamela Munn (London: Routledge, 1993) pp.27-44.

5.3 Recommendations:

I recommend the following:

5.3.1 *This Junior Primary School*

- That the Staff of Scoil Eoin¹⁷⁹ have available to them the findings of this study
- That the staff of Scoil Eoin¹⁸⁰ have the opportunity to discuss how to address an obvious need, clearly expressed through the questionnaire: that of obtaining regular and specific feedback on the progress of their children; That the effects (long-term and short-term, local and national) of a collective *not* meeting of that need would be discussed;
- That regular meetings be instituted between school personnel committed to parental involvement. This group could include the Principal, Home-School-Community-Liaison teachers, past and present, and any teacher who has a personal interest or commitment to it. The group could oversee trends in parental involvement and document lessons learned during current projects. They could also devise a draft policy in relation to parental involvement that could be presented to staff for discussion and development.

¹⁷⁸ This phrase is taken from Article 42 of the Constitution of Ireland, which states that the parent is the primary educator of the child.

5.3.2 *The Principal*

- That the principal would continue to promote the involvement of parents through a school culture that is open and accountable, flexible and committed to serving the educational needs of its community;
- That the principal would continue to find effective ways to stress to all school constituents their responsibility to all children and to the larger community and promote the idea among parents that everyone benefits from having schools in which *all* children succeed;

5.3.3 *General Recommendations*

- Pre-service and in-career development for teachers is central to this whole process. I have already indicated key questions, which need to be addressed during such professional development. While it is important that these issues are flagged at pre-service training, it is likely that on-the-job professional mentoring / training would be more efficacious;
- On-going professional development for principals who can play a strategic role in facilitating parental involvement is essential. They must be aware of the importance of their role and the ways school cultures are inadvertently and at times, deliberately, in my view,

¹⁷⁹ A pseudonym to preserve anonymity.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

promoting non-involvement. They need to consider the possible, long-term consequences of this stance in relation to parents;

- Parent education is also of paramount importance. Specifically, parents should be enabled to consider the various roles that they could fulfil within and without the school as well as examining the issue of their own accountability. Another important issue for parents is awareness and a clear understanding in relation to the teacher's responsibility to balance individual and collective rights;

5.4 A Model for Parental Involvement

A school interested in parental involvement might adopt the following:

- Formalised, structured, classroom, parent-involvement that could become part of the culture of the school. There is no one way to structure involvement, no one way that is free from problems, not taxing of patience, conflictual and time-consuming and no one way that guarantees productive outcomes;
- Training sessions for parents, during which expectations can be aired, roles clarified, confidentiality issues discussed and the practicalities of the help outlined. Invite parents to take on an evaluative stance, indicating that you will be seeking their views afterwards on ways the project could be improved. Lessons learned should be aggregated between classrooms and within a

school with a formal conduit to facilitators of in-service who can reflect lessons learned and good practice back to the professionals for further distillation and reflection;

- Perform active outreach to ensure that on the one hand the same parents are not being targeted to support the school all the time and on the other to ensure a diversity of involvement in relation to race, class and gender;
- Be alert to the possibility that involved parents could either passively or actively exclude other parents from becoming involved and could use their influence to promote their own narrow self-interests;
- Improve the quality of parent teacher meetings so that there is an exchange of meaningful information related to problem solving.

5.5 Conclusion:

Through this action research project, the researcher has experienced the rewards and challenges of parental involvement and documented them accordingly. I have noted the benefits to the parents, the children and myself. I have noted the difficulties and pitfalls for teachers and families of more intense involvement. I remain committed to a process I believe can help to develop shared understandings of the common good, senses of equal worth, for a socially just and educationally fair society.

develop shared understandings of the common good, senses of equal worth, for a socially just and educationally fair society.

Being a parent of a seven year old in 2004, I know what I require as a parent in terms of accountability. I know what it feels like to be 'informed' of school activities via the official letters. I know that schools actually *promote* non-involvement, inadvertently. I'm not sure which is the more serious mistake, the non-involvement or the fact that schools are unaware that they are having this effect.

Meaningful, diverse, parental involvement is potentially the most valuable asset a school could have. However, parents must be realistic and understanding of what is possible in schools. Preparation for their involvement should be comprehensive and thorough. There is a danger that it could get a bad name if there is not a clearly thought-out rationale for it among teachers. If teachers are not involved at all stages, plans for parental involvement are likely to fail and the consequences of having tried and failed could lead to an entrenchment of negative views in relation to the involvement.

It seems unlikely that the Department of Education and Science will prioritise teacher education in relation to parental involvement when the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (P.C.S.P.) seems to have its programme trimmed because of reduced budgetary constraints. It was envisaged that P.C.S.P. would have a role in relation to informing parents on new methodologies and approaches of the revised primary curriculum. However, apart from some giant meetings at a few central venues in the first year, no

serious attempt was made to inform parents on the changes teachers were attempting to implement in the classroom.

However, small projects such as this can move the process forward and has firmed up the resolve of this teacher to involve parents in the classroom *from now on* as well as alerting her to the serious pitfalls associated with it.

I agree with Bastiani¹⁸¹ when he says:

What matters to most parents, however, is not the guarantee of immediate success, but the genuineness of a school's efforts and the spirit of things attempted.

¹⁸¹ John Bastiani, *Working with Parents – A Whole School Approach*, (Berkshire: Nfer-Nelson, 1989) p.22.

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Appendix 1

PARENTAL SURVEY

Section 1:

Q1. Are you ...? Male Female

Q2. How many children do you have in this Junior School?

Q3. Family type: *Please tick one box only*

Lone parent

Co-habiting

Married

Lone parent living with own parents

Q4. What is your level of education? *Please tick one box only*

Inter Cert/Group Cert or Equivalent

Third Level

Leaving Cert/ Equivalent

No formal qualification

Q5. What age are you? *Please tick one box only*

20 - 25

31 - 35

41+

26 - 30

36 - 40

Q6. Financial Circumstances: *Please tick one or two boxes as appropriate*

Lone Parents' Allowance

Deserted spouse allowance

Dual-income

Disability payment

Single income

Family income supplement

Pension

Unemployment Benefit

Section 2:

Please tick one box for each statement

List of statements:

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
1.	I don't feel very welcome when I visit the school					
2.	The school has a caring attitude					
3.	There are enough opportunities for me to meet teachers and talk about my child?					
4.	The school should expect more of my child					
5.	I feel that the school gets the best out of my child					
6.	My child is happy at school					
7.	I am concerned that my child isn't content in school					
8.	I feel I am kept well informed about the school					
9.	I would like more information from the school					
10.	There are enough opportunities for me to become involved in the life of the school					
11.	I feel my child is doing well in school					

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
12.	I would like to know more about my child's progress					

Section 3:

Q. 13 What are the three things that you consider are most important for your child at school? *Please number them 1, 2 and 3.*

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Good behaviour | <input type="checkbox"/> | Self Management | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A happy child | <input type="checkbox"/> | Social skills | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Good self esteem | <input type="checkbox"/> | Confidence Building | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Learn to read | <input type="checkbox"/> | Numeracy | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Extra curricular activities | <input type="checkbox"/> | P.E. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Religion | <input type="checkbox"/> | Music | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| First Holy Communion | <input type="checkbox"/> | Visual Arts | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other
(Please state) | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |

Q. 14 What do you think is the best thing that this school does?

Q. 15 What, in your opinion, is the thing about this school you would most like to see improved or changed?

Q. 16 Can you help with your child's homework? Yes No

Q. 17 *If you answered 'No', to the last question, read the following and tick one box only.*

- | | | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| I am too busy | <input type="checkbox"/> | Helping my child damages my relationship with my child | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I do not know how to help | <input type="checkbox"/> | I cannot read very well | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My child will not co-operate | <input type="checkbox"/> | I work outside the home and find it difficult to make time for it | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire!

**Feedback Session 1:
Questions to think about!**

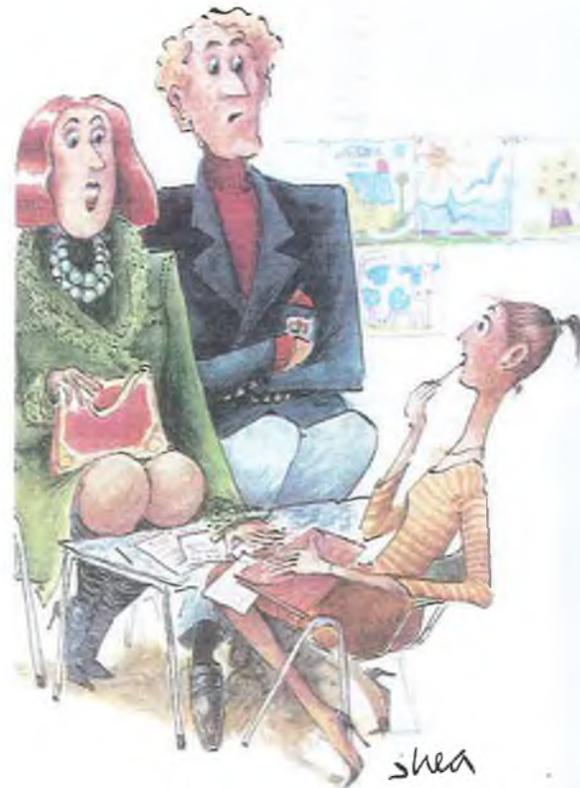
- 1. Did you enjoy the experience?**
- 2. Did you expect to enjoy it?**
- 3. Did you have anxieties around it?**
- 4. Were you well enough prepared for it? (Are there changes you would make to the training session?)**
- 5. Would you be willing to share your feelings about your experiences with other parents?**
- 6. How did your child feel about your being in the classroom?**
- 7. What was the most difficult part of the experience?**
- 8. What was the most interesting/enjoyable aspect?**
- 9. What would be your view in relation to extending the programme throughout the school?**
- 10. What were the benefits to the children do you think?**
- 11. How did the time you gave impact on you personally?**
- 12. Did things change as the weeks went by?**
- 13. If requested, would you volunteer again?**
- 14. Have you volunteered to listen to reading in the past?**

**Feedback Session 2:
Questions to think about!**

1. Did you enjoy the experience?
2. Did you expect to enjoy it?
3. Did you have anxieties around it?
4. Were you well enough prepared for it? (Are there changes you would make to the training session?)
5. Do you think that, as a volunteer, you would be better placed in a class other than that of your child?
6. Thinking about next school year, what things will encourage/discourage you from becoming involved?
7. Were there things about 'classroom life' that you were unaware of/surprised you?
8. How did your child feel about your being in the classroom?
9. What was the most difficult part of the experience?
10. What was the most interesting/enjoyable aspect?
11. What would be your view in relation to extending the programme throughout the school?
12. What were the benefits to the children do you think?
13. How did the time you gave impact on you personally?
14. Did things change as the weeks went by?
15. If requested, would you volunteer to help in this classroom again?
16. Have you volunteered to listen to reading in the past?
17. Any other comments or observations....?



The Pushy Parents



Clare feels like a rabbit in the headlights as Mr and Mrs O'Byrne-Walsh settle in for a good long session about Luke, aged seven, who, they feel, is not reaching his full potential.

Mr seems a friendly sort, Clare's thinking, not bad looking, either. Mrs O'B, on the other hand, is a neurotic hag who is always lurking outside in the corridor, spying through the glass window to make sure that Luke is happy and frequently asking that he be moved up the room, ideally to sit beside James, who's the son of a high court judge. And, then giving her those stale Milk Tray last Christmas.

Anyway they're in for their 15 minutes, and, yes, here it comes out of the handbag - The List, followed by ... is that a dictaphone? Bloody hell, it is! Wait til she tells the staff-room.

"Hope you don't mind," says Mrs O'B in the velvety voice she reserves for tricky clients in her legal practice. "It's just that it's so hard to remember afterwards what was said, isn't it? Now ... we just have a couple of things written down," she goes on, looking to her husband to start. "Michael, you wanted to ask about the Maths didn't you?"

Clare has gotten used to reading upside down across a table, and so she can clearly make out the word "Grind???" at the top of the list. For the first time she has a twinge of sympathy for Luke, who wouldn't be such a bad fellow if he wasn't so thick. "Should we be get-

ting him a grind at this stage?" says Mrs O'B, leaning forward earnestly, her great big knees looming. "It's just that his friend who's at St Michael's is nearly finished the course, while Luke is only on page 22. We're just worried that he's not being pushed."

It's on the tip of Clare's tongue to say that what Luke actually needs is the odd slap, preferably with a wet dishcloth on the back of his legs, but instead she tells them that he's doing very well with his numbers for his age, though his concentration could be a little better.

Mr O'B, all jovial, says that his own school reports were much the same, subtext being that it didn't do him any harm in the long run since he is now a very rich auctioneer, but Mrs O'B cuts across him with her next concern, which is The Reading.

She knows that Luke is a great reader - sure even the other day he picked up her bedside novel and seemed to be enjoying it, so surely he could move on from the Mog books to something more challenging? On and on she drones, allowing Clare to drift off for a while, but she knows how to get rid of them .. she has the trump card right here ... Luke's folder of art work.

"Well, he is a very sensitive child," says Mrs O'B, softening slightly, but not for long. "I'm not mad about her," she says to her husband on the way out. "Did you see her red eyes ... I think she's got a hangover!"

shea