



## A Bioecological Perspective on Parental Involvement in Children's Education

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### Abstract

*The importance of parental involvement in children's education is so well established by so much research that it represents one of the most agreed-upon principles of good educational practice [1]. However, the literature often refers to 'parents' as one homogenous group, disregarding ethnicity, social class, gender, etc [2]. It is often inaccurately assumed that all parents are equally knowledgeable about education systems, and have equal capacity to support their children. Since children's access to school is mediated through their parents, and some are not in a position to promote their children's interests due to differing cultural, economic and social capital [3], interventions expecting all parents to behave similarly cannot provide equitable outcomes for children. This paper reports on an Irish study of parental involvement, theorised by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development [4]. It recommends proactive approaches to relationship-building by educators, well-planned contextual supports, and an understanding of issues of diversity.*

*Keywords: Parental involvement; Diversity; Relationships; Bioecological theory*

### Introduction

Parental involvement is considered internationally to be an important indicator of good education systems [1]. The 'partnership model' is particularly pervasive, but is subject to critique as it may mask inequalities in practice [1]. Often the literature refers to 'parents' as if they are all alike, overlooking socio-economic, gender and cultural differences [2; 5]. It is often assumed that all parents are equally well-informed and have equal capacity to support their children's education. When educational interventions are designed based on this flawed perception, we may inadvertently reproduce the very inequalities we aim to address [6]. To avoid deficit thinking, we need appropriate theoretical frameworks to study these complexities [6], and this paper proposes Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development as one such framework. Bronfenbrenner is best known for his 1979 treatise [7] highlighting contexts of children's development, from direct environmental impacts ('micro-system') to broader cultural factors ('macro-system'), and interactions between levels ('meso-system' and 'exo-system'). This early work presented systems functioning as somewhat static [8], but the model is "an evolving theoretical system" [4, p. 793], and its most up-to-date iteration, the *bioecological* model, incorporates the child's agency, time (both socio-historical and personal - 'chrono-system'), and greater emphasis on reciprocal, non-linear relationships between and within systems [4]. This yields a dynamic framework for understanding complex processes [6]. Its research design is known as the *process-person-context-time* (PPCT) approach.

### Parental involvement through the lens of PPCT

#### Process (P)

The bio-ecological model emphasises *relationships* or *process* in children's development [4], for example those between parents and schools [1]. Often, parents do not perceive schools to be as accessible as they perceive themselves to be, and when parents believe their involvement is not valued, they are less likely to engage [1]. It is necessary for teachers to be proactive in relationship-building, since parents' proactivity may be limited by intimidation [1].

#### Person (P)

Many personal circumstances contribute to feelings of intimidation. For example, the 'cultural capital' [3] of middle-class parents generally matches that valued by schools, but home-school relationships can be challenging for working-class parents [1]. There may also be barriers created through differing linguistic and cultural norms [9]. Many approaches to 'partnership' are based on socialisation, where schools attempt to shape parental attitudes and practices to meet the school's needs [6]. This can

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lead to difficulties for parents in maintaining linguistic and cultural identity, while also supporting their children to succeed at school [9]. It is little wonder therefore that parents from 'minority' backgrounds tend to be less involved in their children's education [2].

Individual circumstances like employment may impact on parental input, and parents with poor physical or mental health or minimal social supports may find engagement difficult [1]. The belief that they have the *ability* to help their children at school is also crucial [1], and self-efficacy beliefs can be lowered when parents feel they do not have the academic competence to support their child [1]. Research has also identified the influence of gender; fathers tend to be less involved than mothers [5].

### **Context (C)**

Consideration of family contexts is vital in understanding parental involvement. There is increasing acknowledgment of divorced, separated and unmarried fathers' rights and responsibilities, and also those of grandparents [10]. The rights of same-sex couples are also increasingly gaining legal recognition [1], and we "must engage with the lived experience of individual family lives, however these are constituted" [11, p. 488]. School contexts are equally influential. When schools proactively welcome parents, they are more effective in developing home-school relationships [1]. Often schools depend on welcoming attitudes, rather than formal structures, but attitudes vary between teachers, even within schools [11].

### **Time (T)**

Time in the busy school day is often identified as a barrier in the absence of formal structures to support engagement with parents [11]. Parents also tend to be more involved at preschool and primary level than at secondary level [1]. Regarding socio-historical time, there has been growing emphasis on parental involvement in international legislation and policy-making [5], but vestiges of traditional structures may still remain [1].

### **Methodology**

This research used qualitative methods, specifically interviews, focus-groups, observation and text analysis, to examine parental involvement in a case-study primary school in Ireland, its three 'feeder' preschools and the two secondary schools into which it feeds (n=163).

### **Findings**

#### **Process**

As predicted by bioecological theory, participants emphasised positive relationships between home and school: "I think the most important thing is communication between the teacher and yourself... If you are open you will always be able to say something and she will be able to say something back" (Parent). Many teachers highlighted proactive relationship-building by schools [1], and expressed recognition of parents' role in education. As a result, parents described very positive relationships, with open communication and a sense of feeling supported and listened to.

#### **Person**

Socio-economic status did not appear to present the significant barrier predicted by the literature [1; 2; 3], and this may reflect the efforts made by the schools to overcome these issues. Nevertheless, the impact of socio-economic 'disjuncture' [8] and 'cultural capital' [3] was noted by some participants - "It's very middle-class/working-class. We do things a certain way and we expect people to fit into our way of doing things... there's a huge fear and the school system hasn't changed a whole lot in terms of accessibility for certain people" (Community-worker). Parents from various cultural backgrounds mirrored the literature [9] regarding the challenges of maintaining linguistic and cultural identity, while supporting their children to succeed at school in Ireland. Some children appeared to acculturate to the dominant culture at a faster rate than their parents, and to reject the home language and culture [9]. This is unfortunate given the cultural importance placed by many parents on children speaking their language [9]. Teachers expressed empathy for parents but indicated that having a parent willing to speak English could be the key to supporting children with the language. However, the literature recommends that asking parents to speak the language of the dominant culture in the home should be avoided with regards to cultural identity, and the potential for language loss [9]. Parents' previous experiences of education also strongly influenced self-efficacy beliefs, and thereby, involvement [1]: "The worry that 'I didn't have a good time myself in school, so I really don't want to be getting involved there'... then it's 'Oh how could I help anyway?'. They would be the two things that



would keep parents away the most” (Teacher). When schools were proactive in raising self-efficacy beliefs, the results were transformative, in some cases leading to parents returning to education themselves [1].

Opposing the literature [1; 5], respondents indicated that fathers were generally as involved as mothers in the education of their children.

## Context

Respondents confirmed that initiatives on parental involvement must be sensitive to different types of families [1; 10]. Adoption, foster-care, and single-parent families were highlighted. Also, if a child had older siblings who already attended the school, parents found it easier since they “know the system” (Parent). However, if an older sibling had difficulties in school, this could impact negatively.

Unfortunately some parents developed a ‘reputation’ that coloured teachers’ perceptions of and interactions with them.

Regarding contextual supports for parental involvement, pre-schools depended on informal approaches, but at primary and secondary level supports became more structured [11]. Significant time and effort were invested in relationship-building with parents. The parents’ classes (particularly English language) in the primary school were positively noted by many, in opposition to concerns about deficit perspectives inherent in such approaches [9]. The primary school also presented parents with a ‘literacy pack’ to encourage them to read with their child. Some parents came into classrooms to support lessons, and when children’s standardised test scores led to concern, parents could learn literacy games and other educational approaches. There were also information days on aspects of the curriculum, to support parents to help with homework. In many Irish schools, children line up outside to be brought to class by teachers, and parents never enter the school. However, in this primary school, parents could take their children into classrooms, facilitating informal communication with teachers, and making parents feel welcome.

The secondary schools had Parents’ Associations, and Parent Representatives on the Boards of Management. There were parents’ handbooks and on-line ‘e-portal’ systems whereby parents could access information. The secondary schools also had allocated parents’ rooms, which not only facilitated the logistics of parental involvement, but also sent a powerful message of welcome [11]. The primary and secondary schools both had Home-School-Community-Liaison teachers, with the specific role of engaging with parents, and they were highly valued by participants.

## Time

Consistent with the literature, parents were more involved at preschool and primary level than at secondary level [1], but this was largely viewed as a developmental progression rather than a problem. Social norms around parental involvement were identified as changing over time, with more expectation that parents should be involved [1]. Many also noted the increasing involvement of grandparents nowadays [10]; in many cases ‘parental involvement’ actually meant ‘grandparental involvement’.

## Conclusion

Using the lens of bioecological theory, specifically the PPCT approach, it becomes clear that ‘parental involvement in education’ requires much greater critical analysis than is common at present, particularly regarding diversity. This leads to a conception of parental *empowerment* rather than mere involvement, and highlights the crucial role of contextual supports and positive relationships in achieving genuine home-school partnership.

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