

**PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT MAKES A
DIFFERENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION**

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IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

A

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INTRODUCTION

This study is mainly concerned with the need for and positive outcome of involving parents in their child's education. I chose the area of disadvantaged children because of the wide variety of literature on this subject. During my Sociology courses in Maynooth I studied the topic of education. The topic which I was most interested in, was that of the argument whether education can or cannot compensate for society. When I had to choose a topic for my study I felt that I would enjoy studying this further.

Research carried out over the last three decades shows that children make better progress at school when their parents are actively involved in their education and schooling. The focus of this study is showing how important it is that parents show an interest in their child's learning. Throughout the literature review I will discuss the ways in which parents are encouraged to participate in education.

It is also concerned with identifying specific difficulties which discourage parents in becoming involved in their child's education. Finally, the study will try to identify the specific ways which would ensure that more parents realise the importance and benefits of their interest and participation in education.

The main idea that needs to be reinforced throughout this study is that parents play an important role in their child's development and education. The parents are the first educators that the child has; what they do at home with the child is of great importance and is the foundation on which all future learning is based. The child spends a great deal of time in the company of parents or other carers and this care needs to be constant and uninterrupted. (National Parents Council Primary 1992 : No.7)

There needs to be a close relationship between parent and child, the parent can give more individual attention at home than a teacher can in the classroom. From this relationship the parents are able to gain a deeper understanding of their child, their needs and their feelings.

This study will try to display how both parents and children both benefit when parents participate in programmes which involve them in their children's education. In the development of such programmes, like the Early Start for disadvantaged children, it is enabling parents to gain confidence in themselves as individuals, as parents and as educators of their children. It also enables them to play a full role as partners in schools along with the teachers and their children.

It is hoped that the current study will make a useful contribution to research in this area by focusing on the role of parents in education for disadvantaged children. With the progress from the work of the Early Start programme in Ireland, this role of parents can be presented as a more attractive and positive role to be played in their children's lives, education and schooling.

The thesis is presented in Chapters. Also included is a bibliography and appendices which contain additional information which is not included in the text.

CHAPTER 1:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

“Children who are poor seemed destined to remain poor and marginalised in the future unless specific policies aimed at reversing the situation are adopted and are successful” (CMRS 1992 : 2)

The problem of children in areas that have come to be known as disadvantaged came sharply into focus in the 1960's (INTO 1995 : 20). The term disadvantaged is usually used to describe a child who, “for socio-cultural reasons, comes into the school system with knowledge, skills and attitudes which make adjustments difficult and impede learning” (INTO 1995 : 20). So when a child enters into school they bring along with them to the school environment a variety of different experiences which they have gained at home. (INTO 1995 : vii)

Bloom 1965, states that it is clear that not all children come to school equally prepared for learning because they all come from different socio-economic backgrounds.

“it is clear that children do not come to school equally prepared for the learning tasks of first grade” (Bloom, B, Davis, A, Hess, R 1965 :12)

The past two decades have seen a dramatic rise in the level of child poverty in Ireland. Many children, due to lack of resources, are living in families which are unable to meet their children's basic needs. The area in which these families live are usually marginalised and stuck in a vicious circle of high concentration of unemployment, poverty and alienation.

The impacts of poverty on children are such as to cause problems in the areas of the

physical, social, emotional and educational well being of the child. (INTO 1995 :1)

Education and schooling have been considered as the way to improve children and to help them to escape poverty and disadvantage. They have been seen as being an equalising force. (INTO 1995 : 1)

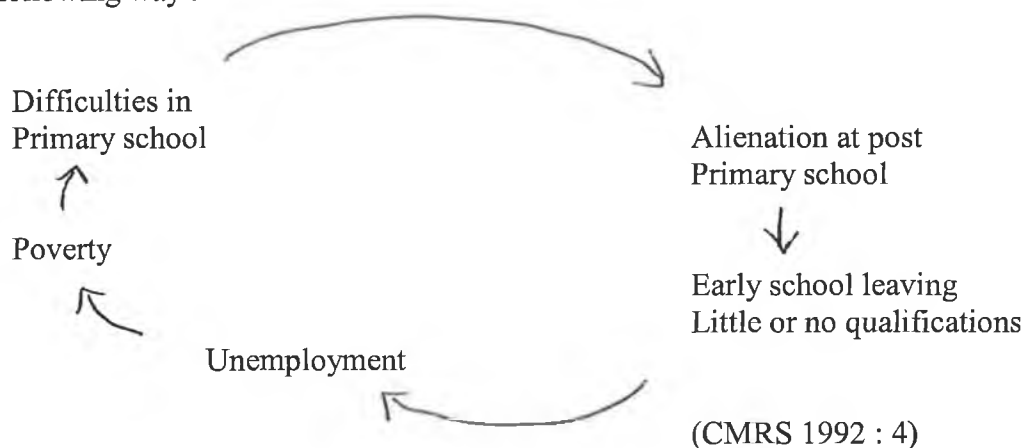
This access to education and equality could help children from disadvantaged backgrounds to make better lives for themselves. The high incidence of educational failure in disadvantaged areas suggest that education does not however serve as an equalising force. In many cases education serves to reinforce existing patterns of advantage and disadvantage in today's society. (INTO 1995 :1)

The clearest definition of poverty has been offered by Townsend 1979, who sees the poor as those whose resources are so below average that it excludes them from the ordinary living patterns, customs and activities of the society to which they belong. Two children, who are born on the same day, can both be loved to exactly the same degree; both be equally wanted, but because they come from different strata of our society, the equality they had, ends because of their social backgrounds. (INTO 1995 :7) Their different backgrounds mean that by the time they reach school they have received different levels of health care, nutrition, clothing and education. They would both have experienced different educational material and they would have experienced different leisure and cultural activities. Some parents would have sent their children to pre-school if they were able to afford it, while other children would be entering primary school with less experience and knowledge. So from the very beginning many children are at a disadvantage from their very first day in school.

This problem of disadvantaged children is not new but efforts to cope with it are.

(Kellaghan 1977 : 1) Children from disadvantaged environments have "*poorer school performance records than those from facilitative environments*" (Deutsch 1967 : vii)

These children start off in disadvantaged homes and continue to remain disadvantaged when they come to school. The children become stuck in a trap which can be illustrated in the following way :



To understand this trap we have to attempt to understand the link between education and poverty.

There is a strong link between social class and educational participation and performance. There is evidence, according to the INTO 1995, that education is more important for determining status in Ireland than in most other comparable societies. Irelands increase in white collar work and service industries from the 1950's to the 1970's has led to a demand for skills and education. With these demands there, and to seek employment and status in Ireland one needs to have a good education.

With this came free education to enable more people to have access to education

and to lower levels of inequality. This has increased participation levels but it has failed in lessening the disparities between groups. The advantaged group of people in our society seem to be the ones who have benefitted the most from Government funding. There are higher levels of early school leaving among the disadvantaged groups. (INTO 1995) This educational failure leaves these people with higher chances of facing economic poverty and social exclusion.

The high extent of inequality in Irish education reflects the failure of the state to treat all children of our nation equally. There are many things wrong with the system such as, many children recognise school as a continual experience of failure and that many of them end up leaving school without the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. This represents that the class a child is born into determines its chances of finishing school, entering third level education and most importantly, it determines if it will be able to seek and gain employment.

This leads our discussion into the strategies, such as early childhood education, that have been put into place to eliminate such problems discussed above. All children need to be recognised as equal and that they all have a potential to benefit our society. As mentioned before, gaining educational qualifications is a major determinant of future employment prospects. And to get away from this trap, intervention is needed at all the stages of education. But the most necessary intervention is needed at the beginning of the cycle, before the child starts formal schooling. It is needed at the pre-school years of the child's life.

“Early systematic intervention is the most effective means for alleviating or eliminating later social and learning disabilities”

(Deutsch and Associates 1967 :77)

This is where the term “Compensatory Education” can be used. It is difficult to define the term because of all the different views, which are evident in the studies on education. From reading many of these views, the definition that stands out, is that in some way, education has to try and make up for the deprivation in society.

“To compensate, within the school, for the children’s socio-economic disadvantage”(Drakes, R 1982 :3)

The compensatory education movement , is characterised by the awareness of special needs of children who are disadvantaged. This has led to the development and planning of compensatory programmes designed to give all children a fair chance in education and also in life. (Drakes, R 1982 :3)

In Kellaghan’s 1977 study, he gives a quotation from Gordon and Wilkerson 1966, which gives their description of pre-school intervention programmes as attempting to provide

“a warm accepting atmosphere in which a child may achieve his/her own maximum social and physical development, and an ordered atmosphere in which selected equipment and activities are offered in sufficient variety to meet each child’s level of interest and ability”

The question of class inequality in education in Ireland was first highlighted by Investment in Education (1966), an OECD / Irish Government Funded report, whose publication has been described as a “watershed” for Irish education.

(INTO 1994 :10)

Interest in the problem of disadvantage and possible approaches to its solution first came into focus in Europe in the 1960’s. In 1967 in Ireland, a committee on educational retardation established by the Minister of Education recommended special arrangements for schools in disadvantaged areas. As a result, one of the earliest approaches to dealing with disadvantaged in Europe was set up by the Department of Education of the Irish Government in collaboration with the Bernard van Leer Foundation 1969. They set up the Rutland Street Project which will be discussed later on in this chapter.

(Education Research Centre 1998 :2)

In Britain in 1967, following the publication of the report of the Central Advisory Council for Education, led to the establishment of Educational Priority Areas. This report is commonly known as the Plowden report. This report was based on the demand for nursery education. The report recommended that nursery education should be available to all those who wish for it. Their main aim was to increase resources to deprived schools. This report examined

“The whole subject of primary education and the transition to secondary education” (Robinson, P 1976 :51)

A Plan for Education, published by the INTO in 1947 suggested that a more child-centred approach to education was to be adopted. At the infant school level, the most significant outcome of this pressure was the publication of a revised version of Notes for Teachers in 1951.

In 1967, it was decided to review the primary school curriculum with a view to bringing the education approaches in the schools into line with modern thinking on the nature of the child and its learning requirements. As a result, a new curriculum was drawn up by the Department of Education’s Inspectors and was formally introduced into all the national schools in the country, in 1971. This new curriculum was a child centred curriculum, and at infant level, all learning was to be organised around play activities. (INTO 1995 :14)

Early childhood education outside of national schools has been developed predominantly in a “bottom-up” manner. This is due to the ideas and work by private individuals and voluntary organisations.

The Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education 1998, uses a quote from the Commission on the Family 1998, stating that there has been a lack of intervention by the state. Although they take into account that the state does provide child benefit and limited early intervention for children at risk of educational and social

disadvantage they also note that there is

“Virtually no state investment in the care of children in the years before entry to primary school” (Commission on the Family 1998 :14)

In Ireland the responsibility for children aged between 0-3/4 years belong with the Department of Health and Children. The age group of 3-5 years are cared for by the Department of Education and Science. This responsibility was enshrined in law with the passing of the 1991 Child Care Act.

“The Irish education system is one of partnership between the State and private agencies” (Report on the National Forum 1998 :22)

Historically in Ireland the State and the church worked together in the provision of primary schools. In the 1937 Constitution, the State are obliged to provide for free primary education.

Also at the INTO Congress 1994, a motion demanding that there should be additional State intervention in schools in disadvantaged areas, was passed. So the State too recognised that the time had come to reassert the importance of poverty as the primary factor in causing educational disadvantage.

It was not until recently that steps were taken to provide facilities for children under the age of four in the general educational system. This happened in conjunction with the Irish Government’s proposal to the European Union in the document Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development (1994-1999) for a Sub-Programme

for Integrated (Socio-economic) Development of Designated Disadvantaged and Other Areas. The main idea surrounding this was to provide support to communities especially ones suffering from disadvantaged. (Educational Research Centre 1998 :2)

High quality early education can make the crucial difference in helping each child develop to their full potential. (White Paper 1999 :vi) The White Paper's main aim is to support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with a particular focus on the disadvantaged. It focuses on children from birth to six years. It covers the areas of child development in the home and supports to parents concerning how best to help their children to learn.

Early childhood education is of itself important whether one is talking about advantaged or disadvantaged. Intervention programmes can establish a firm basis for subsequent learning for all children. The first stage in children's education is extremely important, it is where the foundations are laid. (INTO 1994 :94)

For many years now there has been the trend of middle class families sending their children to pre-school giving them a good basis before entering into primary school. Poor families should be able to benefit from this also.

"Social justice alone would demand that good quality pre-school education would also be available to poor families"(INTO 1994 :94)

Research has shown that class differences in attainment level are apparent from the early stages of schooling. So as the child goes further on in education these differences carry

on with them and also widen. Again early intervention can play an important role in making sure this is stopped before the child enters into further schooling.

(INTO 1994 :94)

Most of the research evidence of the effectiveness of early intervention comes from American programmes. The best known programme is The Project Headstart. It was an anti-poverty pre-school programme created in 1964 by the Economic Opportunity Act to assist communities financing centres for children of limited opportunity. It originally began as a two month pre-kindergarten programme but was extended to one year. Unfortunately initial results were not pleasing, they were suggesting that whatever the children gained was lost during the later years in primary school. More recent results however are more positive, and surveys are showing that the gains are lasting longer but do eventually disappear. (Drakes, R 1982 :12) The services that the project included were not only early childhood education, *“but also social and health services and high levels of parental involvement”* (INTO 1994 :94)

The Irish experience in early intervention programmes, as yet, is somewhat limited in scope and the main one we can look at is that of the “Rutland Street Project.” This programme began in the end of the 1960’s, it was funded by the Van Leer Foundation and they also funded the study which they carried out in the pre-school. In 1969 this project was established in a severely disadvantaged area in the centre of Dublin. The area had poor housing and amenities, which was accompanied by high levels of unemployment and a record of poor educational attainment and achievement.

The overall idea of the pre-school was to provide children aged three to four, in

the area, with experiences that were designed to help them overcome difficulties in the transition from home to primary school. (Kellaghan, W 1995 :11) A structured curriculum was developed during the early years of the project and similar to Headstart, they also made many efforts to involve parents. The overall results were inconclusive but the *“Pre-school element did prove a success”* (INTO 1995 :28)

The pre-school operated on two major assumptions. The first was that

“In view of the marked relationship between measured intelligence at the pre-school stage and at maturity, early intervention was desirable”

(Education Research Centre 1998 :1)

The second was that there needs to be a lot of emphasis on parental involvement. This emphasis can be seen from the outline given on the various intervention programmes. There was considerable evidence from the Rutland Street Project, that a crucial factor in the enhanced performance of individuals who had experienced pre-schooling was the involvement of the children’s family. Parent’s active assistance proved to be crucial, perhaps essential in sustaining and enhancing centre or school based activities.

(Kellaghan, Alvarez, Sloane & Bloom 1993)

The Rutland Street Project did continue in existence and efforts were made to include the use of the curriculum in junior classes of primary schools located in disadvantaged areas.

The main idea from the early intervention programmes that I would like to focus on is the

idea of Parental Involvement. Children need support from home as well as from their teachers. There is a demand for partnership to help children. The early years of a child's life are crucial to their education. The basis for later educational success or failure is laid down in the earliest years of the child's life.

The primary and natural educator of the child is the family. Parental involvement is recognised as vital to the quality of education.(White Paper 1999 :11) Partnership in education is about relationships. These relationships come in three forms. There needs to be a relationship between children and their teachers, children and their parents and also between the parents and the teachers. Parents teach their children which effectively helps the teachers.

"They are first-line clients of the school" (Macbeth, A 1989 :1)

According to the CMRS 1992, the partnership with home and school is not simply about promoting parental involvement in the education of their own child, it is about promoting a particular form of such involvement. The relationship includes characteristics of mutual and shared respect and willingness to negotiate, to benefit the children. This includes sharing information, responsibilities and skills. The relationship can help to make more equal educational opportunities, by sharing ideas and skills. The parents can gain more knowledge of education and teachers can gain more knowledge of the children and their home lives.

The techniques of passing on basic skills such as literacy and numeracy tend to be exclusive to educational professionals. But if the teachers are taught to share their

techniques it can benefit the parents and the children more effectively.

(Hall, S, Kay, I, & Struthers, S 1992 :5) This can also eliminate the tendency for parents to refrain from interfering in case they mix up the child's learning and in turn annoy the teacher. Parents need to be shown that their involvement has positive rather than negative effects in their child's education.

The partnership between parents and schools has now become a well established partnership in the educational field. Parents provide expertise and different ideas and perspectives on the needs of their children. This is essential in the area of pre-school education. Parents and families are the prime educator and they know what their own children want and need. Parents can let the teachers know their child's capabilities, characteristics and any other special needs. Their own experiences and ideas can be joined together by many other parents and the teachers to provide a better education and an educational start to their child's lives.

According to the White Paper on Early Childhood Education 1999, brain research has indicated that the first three years of a child's life are crucial in terms of their development. At home, the involvement from the family provides stimulation, care and social interactions that children need to receive, for rapid development. This important influence and stimulation in their life needs to be carried out and continued through their formal education outside the home. The parents involvement in the home prepares their children for formal education. Their original skills are learnt at home, so this ensures and makes it easier for children to adapt to formal education. It increases their willingness to learn.

“Two-way communication between the parents and the more formal pre-school system enhances the quality of the early childhood education received by the child” (White Paper 1999 :112)

It is clear that nobody can know their child better than their parents. Positive attitudes to education from the home can improve the performance of the child, because of the parents interest in the school, the child receives a more positive attitude towards school. School is presented to them as a positive and supportive environment.

This partnership is recognised by the Department of Education and Science. They have an existing programme called Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL). This scheme operates both at first and second levels. Research from this has also shown that involving parents from minority or disadvantaged groups in educational provision, helps to raise the participation levels in early childhood education.

According to Coolahan 1998, early development programmes work much more effectively when parents are actively involved in the education of their child. Evidence can be seen from projects such as the Rutland Street Project as mentioned before and projects by Barnardos and Muintearas.

Parents make an irreplaceable contribution to their child’s development. Parent-teacher relationships need to involve the teacher reaching out to the parents in a non-patronising way, to empathise and consider the concerns of parents, particularly those in disadvantaged and alienated circumstances.

A study was carried out by Douglas 1964, on the levels of parental involvement and interest in their child's work based on reports made by the class teacher.

These records were gathered on the parents' visits to the school. The evidence supported the view that the working class child was disadvantaged at school largely because of his or her parent's lack of interest in their educational development and progress. Parental interest and attitudes to education outweighed the effects of social class, family size, quality of housing and academic record of the school. (Douglas 1964 :100)

One problem, which interfered with parent-teacher relationship, was that teachers regarded parents as potential threats, both to their authority and to their professional prestige. This attitude can be carried over to their attitudes towards the children.

(Mortimore, J & Blackstone, T 1982 :133) Today there has been a creation of more positive attitudes because both parents and teachers are beginning to realise the important benefit of their working together. Teachers need to also rely on the non-professional educators as well as the professionals.

As I have discussed the great importance of parental involvement, we need to look at some reasons for the lack of involvement. What are the factors which inhibit parental involvement?

Although recently, education policy and the education system has become more parent friendly, there is still an absence of a formal representative structure for some parents. The White Paper 1999 discusses how parents are becoming centrally involved in the development of educational policy.

Parents have been getting involved at many levels, such as, at national level, at individual school levels and by getting involved in activities through involvement in the schools parents association. The representative bodies at national and local levels represent the interest of parents at first and second levels. The National Parent Council Primary represents the interests of parents of children from infant classes upwards in primary schools. So as we can see there is little representation of parents of pre-school children, which hampers their involvement in the policy process and this in turn limits the quality of policy development in that area. This is unfortunate, because we have recognised the importance of the role of parents at the earliest stages of a child's education.

Another factor, which inhibits parental involvement, is the lack, in Ireland particularly, of mechanisms to involve parents in the organisation and management of services, other than school based services, outside the home. Throughout the literature we are constantly told of the benefit of parental skills, to understand and encourage their children. Their input in management and organisation would create a higher quality of provision and parents would be more inclined to participate in the early education of their child. Once they become involved at the early stages, this would encourage them to carry their interest through the following years of their child's formal education. This would also include the parents being able to build on their own self-confidence and understanding of education, especially early education, approaches, ideas and methodologies.

Today there has been a constant change in family structures. Along with this, are increasing economic and social pressures. This has brought with it an increasing need for childminders to enable both parents to go to work. So for substantial periods of the day

during the week, parents are unable to spend as much time caring for their children in the home. With this come many other problems.

According to the Commission on the Family 1998, low educational attainment and less secure housing tenure are characteristics of lone parent families. This type of family structure is also more inclined to suffer from problems such as the risk of poverty and low rates of participation in employment. These types of problems create consequences that involve lack of confidence and skills from the parent to assist in their child's education. There is a need for the Government to deal with these issues.

We can now look at the examples of two articles based on teaching parenting skills and how to work with people. The first is by Johnson, Z, Howell, F and Molloy, B 1993, titled Community Mothers Programme. This article is based on randomised controlled trial of non-professional intervention of parenting. This programme included experienced mothers helping first time mothers in disadvantaged areas. This intervention is needed because of the importance of the quality of parenting in a child's early development. This programme was launched in Dublin in 1983, using experienced volunteer mothers to give encouragement and support to first time parents.

To do this they used a child development programme. They selected volunteers who had to undergo four weeks training and they also got time to meet with other volunteers to discuss experiences and ideas. After this training, with a family development nurse for more support and guidance, their aim was to support five to fifteen first time parents. The family development nurse acted as a resource person who could provide confidence for the volunteer mothers.

This programme sees the importance of parenting and provides a base for first time parents to start good parenting from the beginning of their child's life. This support and collective work teaches the parents to work with other people and takes away fears of being looked down on because they need help. Once their child starts in education there will be a decrease in parents who are afraid to ask for help. They are encouraged to be participants in a greater part of their child's life and learning.

The second article by Ruby Johnston 1993, titled "Learning to work with people," is about another programme funded by the Van Leer Foundation. Unlike the previous programme discussed above, this programme aimed to help develop the parents own potentials rather than just providing them with advice and direction. Two approaches, which they used, were a behavioural approach and also an approach, which included the use of, illustrated cartoon sequences. The behavioural approach involved parents carrying out particular tasks. The use of illustrated cartoon sequences showed the parents alternative ways of dealing with various childrearing problems they could be faced with.

These approaches were aimed at trying to decrease parent's dependence on professionals. The programme attempted to show how to work with people rather than depend on them. To increase the parents self confidence and skills, the programme educated them in child rearing, health care, nutritional improvement and overall development. The idea of the programme did not wish to replace existing professional services. According to Johnston, R 1993, the programme probably enhanced the uptake of services such as

immunisation clinics, parenting classes as well as helping parents to recognise their own expertise.

Overall the programme acts as a catalyst for change in the local community. The parents began to learn to work with rather than for people. They realised and discovered strengths and skills they probably thought never existed. They were given a chance to realise their skills and talents and learn how to use them. They know they can contribute to the growth and development of their children and in turn also help their community.

From these programmes and other forms of literature we are constantly reminded that a major factor that inhibits parental involvement is their own lack of confidence and skills, skills such as literacy and numeracy. With their lack of confidence in parenting and their own educational skills they are more inclined to refrain from becoming aware of their child's education and they lack awareness of how their child learns. This lack of awareness blinds them to the very useful and important role that they as parents can and need to play.

Previous experiences of failure in education can cause parents to lose trust both in themselves and also in the education system. This discourages their involvement. They have made their own perceptions of education and may feel that school will not benefit their children. Some of their attitudes are that if their own parents did not help them, then how can it help their children. (CMRS 1992 :13)

If a parent lacks interest, they are a source of negative attitudes towards education. They may feel that it is easier not to liaise with the school than it is to do so. If the parents of a

child at school had a previous experience of disliking their teachers during their own education, they may have been made to feel stupid, so they would not want their child to have to experience this again.

Getting involved with schools and teachers requires time and it can also require the expense of having to pay a babysitter. Their attitudes would be that it would be easier not to have to deal with visiting the school. Their own distressing memories of their school days hamper their interest in getting involved. Other problems exist from when the parents of the parents today would not have been encouraged to participate so the idea is new to them and they may harbour the idea that they are irrelevant to the schooling process. (Macbeth, A 1989 :23)

These explanations such as working class ignorance about education, lack of interest and inadequate mother-child communication emphasised the need for parental involvement in school. (Mortimore, J & Blackstone, T 1982 :128) With this there has been extreme development on strategies to enhance parental involvement.

“A multi-faceted strategy is proposed to facilitate and encourage parental involvement” (White Paper 1999 :115)

This strategy has been proposed to include greater involvement of and consultation with parents. This will be in the areas of the development of early education policies, support for the parents who are providing early education in the home, enhancing parenting skills and knowledge and also improving access to and dialogue with providers and research on

the best practice concerning the involvement of parents. This strategy by the State is not just to encourage involvement at the early stages; it is to encourage it at all stages.

As I discussed earlier, there is a lack of representation. In reply to this the State is aiming to strengthen the parental voice. With this it also aims to develop a strong and expert interest group, which will participate in the consultation and partnership process.

(White Paper 1999 :115) The result of this is desperately needed. This result will mean a better informed early education policy; it will be of higher quality, more acceptable and in turn will increase greater participation.

The White Paper on Early Education 1999 states that the simplest and most direct way to enhance parental involvement is to facilitate more provision in the home and parent-child groups. Going about this would include a combination of financial support to cover any loss of earnings and also improvements in flexible working arrangements. This would enable parents to provide some or all of their child's care and education in the home. According to the White Paper on Early Education 1999, the Government is looking into these options.

Appropriate support would also have to be provided to parents who choose to take responsibility for their child's early education in the home. Ideas have been suggested such as mobile units providing equipment, material and books so that the parents can educate their children in the best way they can. With this the White Paper 1999 suggests that these units could provide information packs with advice on how children learn and how parents can assist this learning. Another suggestion is to provide the information packs at maternity hospitals and also through community health services. Also parents

can, in connection with the revised primary school curriculum, be sent news-sheets outlining how they may best assist the children's acquisition of literacy skills.

As mentioned before another strategy involves parenting courses. These courses would consist of introductory courses that would have to be pitched at a suitable level, where necessary, either linked to, or including basic literacy and numeracy components.

(White Paper 1999 :116) To ensure the increase in participation by parents, these courses need to be flexible and also be in a variety of settings.

It is essential that parents of pre-school children should have significantly more involvement than parents at other levels. This leads us to discuss the early intervention programme called Early Start, which is the most recent in Ireland. This programme was launched in September 1994. It was a new pilot programme based on the Rutland Street Project. This programme is one element in the Government's local and urban renewal development programme and it

"is considered integral to the wide ranging empowerment and development initiative under the programme" (Kellaghan, W 1995 :12)

This programme was introduced by the Minister of Education, at that time, Niamh Bhreathnach, as she acknowledged the need for early education. (INTO 1995 :vii)

The Early Start programme was established in eight schools in areas designated as disadvantaged in 1994-1995 and, following that, it was increased to thirty-two schools in September 1995. The EU actively supported this project because Ireland lags well

behind other European Countries in its institutional provision for children of four years of age or under. No country is as low as Ireland in participation rates, which is close to zero for the age up to three. Examples of high participation rates are Belgium and France which have rates over 50%. At the age of four, numbers do increase in Ireland, where it reaches 50%, but this is still below the rates in eleven other EU states.

(Education Research Centre 1998 :3)

This programme is primarily an educational programme, but it also concentrates on the development of the child. Given the enormous amount of evidence, which has been discussed, relating to parents' participation, the programme aims to intimately involve parents in the project's activities. Before we discuss how parents are involved we need to explore the aims, description and evaluation of the Early Start Programme.

According to the Department of Education 1995 document, the programme has two major aims. The first is

“to expose young children to an educational programme which would enhance their overall development and prevent school failure”

(Educational Research Centre 1998 :6)

The second aim is to try to make up for the effects of educational disadvantage. The Education Research Centre 1998 has translated this into a number of more specific objectives:

1. To develop a structured programme of learning activities designed to foster relevant cognitive, linguistic and socio-personal skills in the children;

2. To provide opportunities for parents that will enhance the skills that are necessary to enable them to support their children's development and learning;
3. To provide support for staff that will increase their understanding and enhance their skills in the development and provision of a learning programme for three year old children;
4. To provide an enriched environment that will prepare children for school learning;
5. To integrate within-school services in addressing the needs of children and their families;
6. To establish links, where appropriate, between Early Start and other agencies and individuals within the community involved in dealing with disadvantage.

The outline curriculum contained sections on language, cognitive and social-personal development of three year old children. This curriculum was circulated by the Department of Education to the staff of Early Start. The Rutland Street Project also had this curriculum and it focused on the development of skills in the organisation of knowledge and language. While they focused on those above aspects, according to the Education Research Centre, they also recognised the importance of attending to the personality and social development of the child.

The planning of the teachers daily activities was expected to coincide with the objectives of the curriculum. The individual teachers were left to decide, plan and organise the activities. These activities were also to include the child care worker who would assist the teachers.

A group of individuals with experience and expertise was created to monitor and advise

on the project and its future. This monitoring committee was established by the Department of Education and report results would be sent to the Minister for Education. The committee carefully monitored the project and gave advice regarding alternative models of pre-school provision in disadvantaged areas. In particular they also advise on ways in which parental involvement in childhood learning can be developed.

The Early Start philosophy viewed learning as a

“guided discovery through a series of structured activity” (INTO 1995 :29)

These activities are aimed at the “harmonious development” of the whole child. (INTO 1995 :29) The environment created on the programme is to help the children express themselves through music, art, drama, language and physical education. All of these skills are needed once the child enters into primary school and starting early helps them to begin their schooling at a more equal level.

To maximise the attendance at the programme centres there are two sessions per day. The first is a morning session from 0900 to 1130 and an afternoon session from 1200 to 1430. Each session caters for fifteen children and there are two classes in the centre. These classes cater for children aged three, who live in the catchment area of the schools in which the Early Start classes are located. (INTO 1995 :31) The centres are staffed with fully qualified primary school teachers and in addition to this there is also a qualified childcare worker.

Also parental involvement seems to be the key element of the scheme and to encourage

this, an annual grant is paid to each full unit for the development of parental involvement. This parental involvement is taken at three levels. The parents are all belonging to an advisory group in each centre. The second way in which they are involved is in the everyday running and the organisation of the centre. Parents are encouraged to come in and participate with the programme in making it better for their children. Finally, emphasis is put on the participation of the parents when it comes to the centres activities. They join their children during activities, again to show both the programme and their children their willingness and encouragement towards the project. It creates a shared atmosphere between the programme and the families. Not only does it help the children, but it also helps remove the feeling of alienation and helps parents to develop a clearer and fuller understanding of their child's learning needs. (INTO 1995 :29, INTO 1994 :97)

For the parental involvement in the classroom, parents were invited to attend sessions with their child. This was arranged on suitable days for both the parents and the teachers.

Different schools devised different ways of encouraging parents to attend classroom activities. The Education Research Centre 1998, gives the example of one school, where they invited parents to attend a thirty minutes session every two weeks. During this time parents participated in activities such as jigsaws, sand and water play and blocks with their own child. Teachers were able to meet and speak with the parents on an informal basis. Another school the Evaluation Report 1998 talks about took a different approach. This approach was when a child had finished a product of their work they could display it on a table titled " Things we made today." This table could be inspected by the parents when they collected their children from class. Together with this, the same school also held an informal meeting once a month where the months activities were

reviewed.

Although the Evaluation Report can give these details, they are held back in one way because no records of Early Start parent attendances are available. They can tell from site visits that a vast majority of mothers attend at least one Early Start session during the year and generally more often than just once. According to their figures they did note that seventeen fathers attended in the first year, thirty in the second year and twenty-two in the third. Attendance of both parents is greatly encouraged. Mentioned earlier in this review, it is hard for some parents with work commitments to attend, but there is evidence that grandparents or other relatives have attended in their place.

Another way to help parents with learning activities for their children was set up, to enable them to carry out these activities at home. All of the Early Start schools developed a system of lending books, toys, games, videos and other materials. (Education Research Centre 1998 :38) This activity created enthusiasm among both parents and children. It created greater accessibility to materials that these children would not have at home. Again there are no records of the extent of parent participation in these activities. The Evaluation Report 1998 does however give evidence that according to the teachers the vast majority of parents borrowed materials.

Co-ordinators in all of the schools agreed that the Early Start scheme provided an ideal opportunity for parents to have a pleasant and positive experience of education with their children. Because the attendance at Early Start was optional, it created a friendlier, more relaxed atmosphere for parents.

Various courses and talks were also arranged for the parents, with the main topics based around a child's development and health. Programmes were also run by HSCL co-ordinators and parents were actively encouraged to participate. As we can see, everything provided for the parents was informal. No pressure was put on them and they were constantly faced with relaxed environments, good advice and support. According to the Evaluation Report 1998, parents responded well and the level of involvement of parents who did attend sessions ranged from observing activities and working with their own child to running an activity with a small group of children.

The overall aim for the Department of Education's pre-school programmes is to compensate for background deprivation. The child is seen as an active learner in a social world. (Collahan, J 1998 :79) They aim to support the child and help them gain confidence and encouragement to fully participate in education.

Early intervention programmes as we have seen put strong emphasis on language development

"to stimulate creative expression, provide for the acquisitions of information, and offer learning opportunities in such areas as language, communication, motor and social skills" (Kellaghan, T 1997 :25)

This emphasis is used due to the view that the disadvantaged child is entering into primary school which is like a "foreign land" to them. (Deutsch 1967 :78) This environment is very different to them and the teacher uses a vocabulary the child may never have heard before. The teachers language is different to the language at home. In

many middle class homes the child's language is extended. This is helped by their parents because of their responses to the child's questions and statements. But in contrast, for the child from a culturally deprived background, the parents are more likely to respond to the child with a monosyllable or to nod their heads without using words.

(Bloom, B, Davis, A, Hess, R 1965 :14) This language difference will be discussed later on in the section of theory where I will refer to Basil Bernstein and his Elaborate and Restricted Code. (Slattery, M 1992 :24)

Bernstein stresses the importance of the creation of nursery pre-school education. But he also states that this has to be dealt with efficiently. There needs to be a weakening of the division between infant and junior stages and secondary stages. The Early Start Programme is set up in connection with the local primary school. This encourages the continuation of the gains the children received in pre-school. The pre-school and the junior school work together and so enhance the chances of the knowledge benefitting the children through their education for longer periods of time.

Early childhood intervention shouldn't be seen as

"the panacea which will eliminate the effects of poverty and disadvantage" (INTO 1994 :97)

Nevertheless, it does play an important role as part of an overall strategy to try and help reduce the effect of poverty on children in education. Working with a child at a young age before they enter into formal schooling helps them to gain a head start to try and get them a good start in education. The pre-school situation

“can serve as a real stimulant to development and learning, as well as a sociocultural bridge between the background of the slum child and the demands of the school” (Deutsch 1967 :79)

CHAPTER 2:
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To start my theoretical framework I am going to use the theory on education by Buber. He had two basic approaches to education. The first was that the child is to be shaped into a form.

“as for which the educator must first visualise so that it may serve as a directive for his work” (INTO 1995 :103)

The second was that the educator has to allow the child to become himself or herself. (INTO 1995 :103) These two approaches are to try and help the child to avoid obstacles that can hold them back. The modern theory is that of freedom of development: - to allow the child to develop freely within themselves and the educator is needed to allow them to do this. But the educator also has to let the child do it themselves so it is more of an individualistic approach. So there is a need for balance between the two, so that the child is not given too much freedom. The child needs to grow and develop in its own way.

Education plays a large role in the development of a child. School provides an opportunity for socialisation which provides an environment for dialogue, discovery, exploration and problem solving. They are the foundations on which *“provision of early childhood education should be constructed”* (INTO 1995 :104)

Concerning a system for very young children Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky provide the basis for developing a high quality educational institution. The main theory for these infant children in education, is the uniqueness of each child. Piagets theory puts

the main emphasis on experience and discovery. The child is continually exploring and discovering things on which they construct their own knowledge of the world around them.

“the child is a universe of one, an intelligence which organises the world by organising itself” (INTO 1995 :105)

Piaget’s main view of children and education is that children construct their own knowledge of the world by *“acting on and interacting with objects in time and space”* (INTO 1995 :105). Again he is emphasising their active exploration and discovery of the world around them. He does not see the child as needing help to gain their knowledge. Piaget feels that the child gains this alone once they try to solve the problem themselves and in doing so construct their own knowledge. This thinking shows us that his theory feels that the school has to provide an environment for the children to be able to discover things by themselves individually. The environment he feels that needs to be provided is one of

“friendliness, trust, acceptance, supportiveness, warmth and sensitivity”
(INTO 1995 :105)

As far as early intervention programmes are concerned, this theory does not fit in very well. The whole idea of intervention is to help the child, and it is not the individualistic approach that Piaget talks about. The child needs to interact with other children which Piaget fails to include. Piaget also neglects the crucial role that language

plays in cognition and learning.

Teachers have long held the view that children perform a lot better if they have the help of an adult. Vygotsky has this view, he argues that children can gain more from education by learning through instruction.

“children’s capacity to learn through instruction is, in itself, a fundamental feature of human intelligence” (INTO 1994 :106)

Piaget, whom I discussed earlier, saw the child as being unique and that if they were given the tasks they did it best if they were left to their own devices. Vygotsky on the other hand sees that co-operation is needed among children. They need to socially interact and learn together with the help of an adult, whether it is the parents or the teacher. Piaget stresses the need for exploration and discovery, but Vygotsky stresses the need for instruction to compliment the learning process.

Central to Vygotsky’s theory is what he has called the *“zone of proximal development”* and this is a zone or gap that exists for a child on their own and what they can achieve and what a child could accomplish with the help of more *“knowledgeable others”* (INTO 1994 :106)

So both theorists have two contrasting views of readiness for learning. Vygotsky sees the child as being ready not only when they have their own knowledge but also when we can see the child’s capacity to learn once they receive extra help and encouragement. (Wood, D 1988)

“Knowledge is embodied in the child’s culture, in the actions, work, play, technology, literature, art and language of his or her society”

(INTO 1994 :106)

The theorist Bruner, JS describes the learning process for children through the interaction with people who have experienced culture. He calls them “*vicars of culture*” and sees them as the providers of knowledge to children by helping them acquire and develop it. Bruner agrees with Vygotsky and how a child needs instruction, influence and assistance from an adult. The child needs to have an interpersonal relationship with the more mature adult who has experienced culture through their own lives.

Piaget and Vygotsky are also concerned with the nature of language and how it also has an effect on intellectual development. Although, Piaget is quite negative towards the role of language, he argues that it “*exerts no formative effects on the structure of thinking*” (INTO 1994 :107). He feels that language does not actually effect or change the way a child is thinking. Vygotsky on the other hand sees language and speech as being important. He sees it as helping to form the ability to evaluate and memorise, so it plays an important role in assisting a child to learn.

Basil Bernstein is known also for his study on language use and how it effects children. His study was on the language used by the different social classes. His theory is both “*elaborate and complex*” (Slattery, M 1992 :24). This theory attempted to link what went on in the home of a child to what went on in the school. It was based on the language patterns of middle class and lower class people which he called, Elaborate and Restricted codes. The Elaborate code is what he calls the language of the middle class.

This code according to Bernstein is more grammatically right, logical and also descriptive and they have a wider use of vocabulary. Whereas the lower class code which Bernstein calls Restricted, leaves them with simple, limited and repetitive language. His theory is that the elaborate code is more universalistic and can be understood by anyone and does not depend on their existing knowledge of a certain context or social group. (Slattery, M 1992 :25)

On the role of education, Bernstein also argues that schools are very middle class orientated institutions. So with this he also sees the teachers as being middle class and promoters of this middle class elaborate code. This causes complications in the education of the child. Middle class children benefit because they are used to this code, but the lower class are at a disadvantage because they find the code hard to understand. However this theory of linguistic code does not carry enough evidence to prove that these Elaborate and Restricted codes are the main key to social class differences. But it does point out why some children from disadvantaged backgrounds feel like they have entered the “foreign land” when they first enter primary school.

These theories fit into my research in trying to explain how a child needs to be provided with a stimulating environment. Starting early makes sure this is provided to give children guidance and stimulating experiences. The pre-school provides the child with a whole range of experiences, social interaction and language. Disadvantaged children need this to help them progress with their education. Coming from a disadvantaged background and going into formal schooling, the child has lacked all this

guidance and has missed out on early learning and stimulating environments. If we were to go by Piaget's theory the child would be left to experience things in a deprived environment. But to follow Vygotsky's theory which early intervention programmes do, we can ensure children receive the attention and help they need. On their own they miss out on social interaction with other children, if they are sent to pre-school they receive learning experiences which are prepared and guided by an adult figure, which Vygotsky sees as a very important part in a child's learning process. In the intervention programmes, this adult is the teacher who is trained to teach and guide these children. Also the parents are guided and encouraged to be an educator to their child.

Developing an appropriate curriculum which takes into account all of these aspects of how young children learn and think

"through exploration, activity and social interaction is essential in order to construct an ideal infant classroom scenario" (INTO 1994 :107)

CHAPTER 3:
INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

As an introduction to my research section I need to explain why I chose to use two methodologies. When I first arrived at School B the teacher introduced me to four parents who were willing to answer my questions. I brought the parents individually into an informal situation. I began the interviews by telling the parents why I was carrying out the research. I also added that they would be anonymous and I would not name the school I had studied.

All of the respondents were happy to co-operate with me and were very friendly. My problems started when I was receiving answers which were very basic. None of the parents were very forthcoming with elaborating their answers. My interview questions were semi structured so that I would not intimidate these parents. I also took into account that they may not have received an education themselves. I was aware that these parents were living in disadvantaged areas and that they were disadvantaged. Before I spoke to the parents the teacher also informed me not to expect much. She added that I was lucky even if I got one syllable answers. The teacher told me that all of the parents were very nice but would be cautious and uneducated to answer hard questions. The wording in the questions is very clear and basic. I also left them open to elaboration.

The parents did answer the questions I talked about and did explain themselves when I asked them why they had a certain opinion. They seemed to lack the ability to elaborate and extend the time of the interview. The time element was a large problem, these parents were dropping their children to school and maybe they did not have the time to really talk to me.

I was very friendly and I really showed an interest in their ideas. When I had finished the interviews I felt that they had held back on any extra background information. I could not directly ask them about their home lives or their childhood. But I did hope that from questions 10, 11 and 12 that they would give me some idea of their previous education. I really only got yes and no answers and there was no signs of wanting to tell me more. When I did try to get them to elaborate they were not very interested.

The positive aspect from my interviews was that I did get to see their admiration for the programme and how it had helped them and their children. I also saw how they had realised the importance of their involvement. There were no negative feelings towards the programme. In many ways I did get the information that I needed and it all supported the literature that I had reviewed. I was disappointed that I did not get any in depth idea of their own lives and childhood to see why they think the Early Start is so important and better than the education they had received.

I told the teacher after my interviews that I was not totally satisfied with my results. With this she invited me to spend the morning with the class. She stated that I had written so much about the programme and that now I needed to see how it really works.

I spent the morning with the teacher and the children. This did give me an insight into the lives of the children and their parents. The teacher invited me to join in the whole morning. I read stories, sang and danced with the children. I could see that they loved that I was enjoying myself as much as they were, I was showing an interest in their lives. I could now see how they must feel when their own parents get involved.

While the children were eating their lunch both the teacher and the care worker gave me a deeper insight into the type of lifestyles these children have. Some of the children did not have a father figure in their lives. These children were children of young mothers. One child who was three had a twenty year old mother and a one year old sister. The teacher informed me that this child lived with his mother in her mothers house. The child's mother and his baby sister all share the same room. The child has to share a single bed with his mother with a cot beside them for his sister. Each day the young boy finds it hard to stay awake during the morning because of his sister crying during the night. The teacher did add that since the mother has been welcomed into the programme she has become more aware of her child's needs and feelings. She also attended all the courses. They had courses on nutrition and health, which have encouraged her to take better care of her children. The teacher was like another mother to her and she encouraged her to participate in her child's education. This worked and the care worker pointed out that the improvements in the child are very noticeable. He used to be very shy and quiet but since his mother came to school with him he settled in and made friends with the other children.

Another child according to the teacher was left with her grandparents all of her life. The teacher pointed out that if her grandparents did not get involved she would not be on the programme. Her mother according to the teacher prefers to go out partying and no matter how hard the programme tried to encourage her, they were unable to get her to see the importance of her help.

In conclusion all of these children came from extremely disadvantaged families, so I can conclude that this is why the interviews were not very successful. I left that day and realised that I saw more from the morning I had spent in the classroom observing the parents in the morning and when they collected their children. When I went to School B I had to carry out the same routine so that I had the benefit of both experiences to get better results for my research.

CHAPTER 4:
METHOD 1: INTERVIEWING

A clear definition of a qualitative interview is as follows

“Encounters between a researcher and a respondent in which the latter is asked a series of questions relevant to the subject of the research. The respondents answer constitutes the raw data analysed at a latter point in time by the researcher” (Ackroyd & Hughes, 1983 : 66)

I have chosen to carry out semi-structured interviews. The questions are clearly done and the end is left clear. The questions were open enough to allow for a clear degree of explanation and a chance for the interviewees to elaborate and answer with their own degree of information.

These interviews consist of informal questions in order to develop an informal environment. In my research of the literature, I noted that these parents enjoy and appreciate informal environments, so with informal questions they can feel relaxed and no pressure in having to give answers to questions they fail to understand.

Interviews allow the interviewer to get the information that they want to know because the knowledge and evidence are situational and interactional. The interviewer can lead the way the interview will go. An important aspect of interviews is that the questions require long informative answers. This can not be gained from short questions as in a questionnaire.

The interviewer's presence in an interview can allow them to watch and observe the ways in which people work out and articulate their understanding and responses to the questions. With this it also allows observation of how they interact and participate with the interviewer. I will be able to tell if the interviewee is interested in their involvement with education and this will benefit the analysis of their answers.

For my research I need to know and explain about the social process of early education. For this my methodology needs to allow me to understand from people's accounts and experiences rather than a more superficial analysis of surface comparability between accounts of large numbers of people. (Mason, J, 1996 :41) I need to achieve and discover depth and understanding of parental involvement in early education rather than a broad understanding of surface patterns.

I felt that one of the ways I could get this understanding and depth was from interviews. Asking people for their accounts, ideas and by talking and listening to them was one way I would be able to give the interviewees more freedom and control of the interview situation. This can generate fairer and fuller representation of the interviewees' perspectives. (Mason, J 1996 :41) Interviewees can give a wide base of information, opinions and support. With interviews it enables you to make sure that they feel comfortable and enjoy the interview. With some other methodologies you may not be able to be present to see people's reactions and if they enjoyed participating in your research.

Although the interviewees presence helps the interview to be carried out in depth, it also means that the interviewer has to think quickly on their feet to enable them to achieve the best results possible. The interviewer can establish a rapport and trust with the interviewees to motivate them to respond.

As the interviewer is present throughout the interview they can see any misunderstandings and difficulties that might arise while the interview is being carried out, so they can help by explaining more. The interviewers presence also allows he or she to control the order in which respondents receive the questions to help them explain their answers in full.

Unlike questionnaires and observation methods of research, interviewers can control the context of the interview. With questionnaires we are not aware of the presence of other people while they are filling in their responses. They may not be able to be truthful and may be influenced by other peoples opinions. With interviews it is only the interviewer and the interviewee present, so there is no outside impact on their answers.

With the problem of misunderstanding and difficulties in an interview situation the use of visual aids such as prompt cards can be used to help the respondents. With greater access to helping the interviewees there is a greater response rate.

There are some disadvantages to carrying out interviews. To carry out the interviews the interviewer has to travel to the different areas to achieve their results. For my research

these costs were very low because of the close geographical location of the schools I visited.

Another disadvantage, according to Jennifer Mason 1996, is the age, sex or race of the interviewer. This can alter results achieved because of opinions of the interviewees. They may feel uncomfortable with the interviewer and they may hold back on answers incase they might offend the interviewer.

Finally, Mason 1996, also refers to the disadvantages that can occur because of the interviewers expectations or personal characteristics that might influence the responses they receive.

Interviews allow the interviewer to ask non-directive questions and then they can probe the interviewees answers by asking for clarification. With open ended interviews and unstructured interviews the person is allowed to talk about the subject with their own frame of reference. It gives complete and direct access to the subjects point of view. It is an in-depth way of qualitative research.

PART 1:
RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

SCHOOL A

Out of the four interviews three of the parents were experiencing their first time of having a child on the Early Start Programme. Parent 3 was the only one who had experienced this programme twice before.

Parent 1 and parent 4 had older children who had not been through Early Start. When asked if they noticed any differences parent 1 said that she did not notice anything. She explained that she had older children who had been to the local community playschool. Parent 4 had four older children. They had all entered junior infants as their first time of formal education. This parent had noticed many differences. She felt that her child was more prepared for formal education because her child had gained more basic skills such as playing with other children, sharing and a wider grasp of their vocabulary.

All of the parents felt that it was very important for them to be involved in the programme. Parent 1 felt that it enabled her to keep an eye on the teacher and her child. When I asked what she meant by this, she explained that she could see if the teacher was being nice to the children. All of the parents enjoyed being able to watch what her child learnt and to see how they coped in school.

Parent 2 gave a similar explanation but she was much more interested in seeing everything her child was doing. She was also interested at what went on during the day and the way things worked.

Parent 3 and parent 4 found her involvement helped her to have a better relationship with her child. She found that they are able to help each other when they are doing activities together in the morning.

When I asked about their own particular involvement all four parents explained how involved they had been. They were all readily available if they were asked by the teacher to help. They have all been on the school tours and were present for their assigned days. Parent 4 said that she stayed in the classroom for an hour a day to help her child with his activities.

Parent 1 and parent 3 both discussed how they would not and have not been involved in their other children's education through primary school. They doubted that they would be involved in their child from the Early Start Programme but would be available if they were asked.

All of the parents found the environment in the classroom at Early Start to be very inviting. When asked in what way they find it inviting, their answers were all very similar. They all loved to see the different colours and the toys and teachers. You could tell by their answers and their reactions that this type of inviting atmosphere was very different to them. They would not have got the chance to attend a pre-school with such enthusiasm. The overall response to this question was the positivity they experience from entering the class.

Again all of the parents said that their children were very happy at Early Start and enjoyed going to school. Their reaction brought back memories of their older children who hated to go to school. But the pleasant environment they are greeted with every morning makes their children happy and willing to learn. The positive attitudes from the parents about the Early Start also shone through during these interviews. This obviously is passed on to their children which supports much of the literature.

Parents 1 and 4 did not find that they had learnt any new parenting skills. Both gave the reasons that they had older children so previous experience had taught them the skills they needed to know.

Parent 2 was very sure that she had learnt to be more patient with her child. She said she could handle situations better now than before. She can deal with things with a calmer approach. Parent 3 also found she had learnt new skills such as spending more time carrying out more tasks and helping her child.

All of the parents felt very sure that their attitudes to education had changed due to the Early Start Programme. They were all also very sure that this programme was a better way to start education than they had done before.

Parents 1 and 4 did not have any ideas as to how parents could be more involved in their child's schooling. But parent 2 had a more positive outlook and felt that more parents need to be involved and represent themselves on the parents association. Like parent 2,

parent three agreed with the fact that all parents need to be constantly reminded that they need to talk and communicate with their children's teachers.

All of these respondents were very positive to the Early Start approach and seemed to enjoy it as much as their children. They have been given the chance to be educated with their children. They get to see how their child is progressing in school. There was no lack of commitment on either the sides of the parents or the teachers. They all worked in a partnership together. The results of this so far are the fact that there is so much positive reaction to the whole situation and this has to benefit all of the children.

SCHOOL B

This was the first experience of Early Start for all of these four respondents. Parents 1, 3 and 4 all had older children who did not go through Early Start. When asked if they notice any differences they were all very positive that they saw noticeable differences. These differences included the better development of their child, which made them more mature and settled in school. One parent was very sure that this child on the programme was definitely brighter and more developed than any of her other children at that age. Another parent saw differences which she saw were gained from the wonderful work of the Early Start Programme.

They all thought that parental involvement was very important in the education of their children. They all gave similar answers that their involvement was important so that they too can find out what is going on in the classroom and what their children are learning. One parent saw that her presence in the classroom gave her child confidence. Her child is more confident at carrying out her activities. She also enjoyed being able to watch how the teachers taught her child. Another parent felt that her involvement made it easier to communicate with her child. They have a better understanding of each other.

Parents 1 and 2 said that they had not been involved as they would liked to have been. But they always took time off when possible like for today for the Graduation. The other respondents felt that they got involved as much as they could and were there many times a week.

All of the parents intend to get involved in their children's further education through primary school.

They all enjoyed the inviting atmosphere in the Early Start classroom. When asked why parent 1 said that the time she spends in the classroom is always full of fun and laughter. She also said that the teachers were very nice, helpful and encouraging. The other parents had similar opinions and enjoyed the interaction between the teachers and the other parents.

Parent 3 noted that the number of children in the classroom was conveniently small and everybody knew each other. All of the parents said that their children loved coming to Early Start every morning. They added that they were disappointed that this day was their last in the programme.

Two of the parents felt they had not learnt any new parenting skills and like the parents in school A, their reasons were because they had older children. The two other parents gave similar answers that they had learnt to be more patient and helpful with their children. One of the parents felt that she was now able to discipline her child better in a much calmer and fair way.

All of their attitudes to education had changed and one reason for this from one parent was because she felt more appreciated. Her presence was wanted and she felt both the teachers and her child enjoyed her presence and participation.

They were all very definite that this programme is the best way to begin education than the way they had done before. They felt that they had been thrown in at the deep end.

All four parents felt better and more confident when it came to helping their child to be more involved but parent 1 felt they should help out more with their child at home and at school and to show them they are needed and welcome. Parent 2 felt her help was necessary and more parents should be told how important this help is.

PART 2:

DISCUSSION OF THE INTERVIEW RESULTS

As mentioned in my introduction to this section I needed to do both short interviews and participant observation. Together these showed me the positive attitudes towards the need for early education and parental involvement.

My results from the interviews were very positive. Although it was not all of the parents first experience of Early Start, I still got very positive feedback from the overall advantages of the programme. As we can see in the results many of these parents had older children who had not been to Early Start. Many of them did however tell me that their older children had been sent to pre-school in the local community. But they did feel that the Early Start gave more noticeable benefits. The main differences they discussed was that their children were more prepared for formal education. One parent discussed that her child had gained noticeable differences to her older children when it came to basic skills like vocabulary, art and a wider range of knowledge. She also felt that her child was more comfortable and confident in the classroom than her older children were in pre-school and also in primary school.

This response can be linked with many parts of my argument in the literature review. First, the discussion of how the overall idea of the pre-school was to provide disadvantaged children aged three to four with an opportunity to help them overcome difficulties in the transition from home to primary school. Many of the responses positively support this approach.

All of the eight parents I interviewed felt that it was very important for them to be involved in the programme. The reasons they gave support the evidence from reviewing the literature on this subject. There was a mutual agreement that their involvement benefits their children. They were given an opportunity to share knowledge, skills and information among other parents and also with their child. Increased confidence was one example of how they saw their role as being important. Their children were more confident at home as well as at school. Signs that their children were more comfortable were visible to the parents. They also saw that their involvement helped their children to settle better than their previous children had.

If a child is more confident and comfortable it enables them to be more attentive and learn more. Their parents saw that their presence enabled them to watch how the teacher disciplines and teaches their children. They also explained that while they were in the classroom they could see what their child learnt everyday and how they learnt it. This enabled them to carry on this teaching at home. They too were able to understand what their children were learning.

This leads my discussion to how the parents all agreed that they were a lot more confident now in helping with their child's education. Again if we look back to the literature review we can see that one of the problems with getting parents involved was their fear of interfering. Their confidence is much higher, so they are less likely to feel that they could mix up the child's learning. The teachers have devoted a lot of time to the parents with encouragement and they have shown them the positive effects they can have

in their child's education. The teachers have helped the parents realise that their help does not annoy them or cause confusion in the children.

This partnership between parents and teachers is well established in both schools A and B. From the questions asked we can see that the parents are very comfortable with the teachers because of the inviting environment. In the literature review it was stated that this partnership is very important. Many of the respondents found it very easy to talk to teachers. This communication is necessary for the parents to let the teachers know their child's capabilities and this also works for the teachers. Parents need to know how to help their children and a partnership with the school enables them to see how their children are coping and how they can help their children at home with any problems they may have.

Five of the respondents replied that their attitude to education has changed since getting involved with the Early Start Programme. From questions nine and ten from the interview, I was aiming to find out the parents attitude towards education. As discussed in the literature review previous experiences of failure in education can cause the loss of trust both with the parents themselves and also with the education system.

Preconceptions of education and negative attitudes towards school can be embedded in parents minds because of their own previous experiences. In the responses to these questions all of the respondents felt that this programme is a better way to begin school education, than the way they had been educated before. Their responses were so definite and many of them briefly explained how they had been "thrown" into school at junior

infants and that they were expected to learn with no help from home. This programme has helped them to lose the negative attitudes and replaced them with positive feelings and thoughts towards education.

These more positive attitudes were also discussed in the literature review. I referred to the important fact that positive attitudes to education from the home can improve the performance of the child. This positive attitude to education is directly passed down to their children. Proof of this can be seen from the eight responses to Question 7. All eight parents said that their children loved to come to Early Start everyday. The children see the parents happy bringing them to school in the morning. The parents happy mood is passed to the child and in many cases this can be passed from the parent to the child. All of the respondents enjoyed seeing how happy and positive their children were every morning going to school. They also enjoy hearing positive feedback from their children after a morning at school.

Throughout the literature about early education and the Early Start Programme we are constantly told of the importance of providing a supportive and positive environment to both these children and their parents. Both school A and B have certainly accomplished this aim. From the responses to Question 6 we hear from all eight parents that both classrooms are inviting in many ways. None of the parents felt there was anything negative about the environment in the classroom. When we are made to feel welcome somewhere we can relax and focus our attention instead of feeling out of place and

unwanted. Their presence is always needed and appreciated by the teachers and the children.

The bright colours, toys and activities were all mentioned as reasons as to why the classroom is inviting. These parents were greeted by brightly painted walls, windows and furniture. There were boxes of toys and selves full of activities in both schools. The parents felt the atmosphere was of happiness and they felt like children themselves with all the colours and toys they were surrounded by. Some of these children would not have as much variety of toys and activities at home. The classroom gives them the opportunity to experience these new toys and activities which they would not yet had a chance to experience at home.

Four of the respondents discussed how they had learnt new parenting skills. Each of the schools provided them with classes on nutrition, health and child development. These parents discussed how they attended these courses to help their children. The other four parents said that they had not learnt anything new about parenting because they had older children whom they had disciplined by themselves.

The four parents who agreed that they had learnt new parenting skills, discussed the way they are now a lot more patient with their children. They said they take a calmer approach and they find it easier to handle any situations they become involved in. These parents also mentioned how they find they are more helpful with their children at home. They devote more time in helping their children with games and activities.

The informal approach mentioned in the literature review, is provided to the parents and from the eight respondents the result was that all of them attended the classes provided when possible. The benefits are clear from the responses. The parents were more relaxed and confident with their children. The whole aim is to help them and encourage them to educate and devote more time and consideration to their children. Half of the respondents have done this and answered with a sense of achievement. One mother said that she had become stricter with her only child but calmer and more patient in the approach. She said she was a bit of a “Hitler” before she learnt new ways of dealing with situations.

Only one of the respondents said that they would not continue to be involved in their child’s education as they move up through primary school. Her reason was that she was working and did not have time to come to the school. She did however say that she would be involved with her child’s education at home. But all of the other respondents were very sure that they will continue to be involved at all stages of their child’s education. Many of the respondents added that they hope they will be made feel as welcome and comfortable as the Early Start Programme has made them feel.

This is where Bernsteins argument is supported. As discussed earlier he stresses the importance for a lessening to be made in the division between infant, junior and secondary school stages. Both schools A and B were attached to the local primary school. Children from the Early Start can move into the junior infants the following September. Both these schools keep a close connection between the programme and the

primary school. Each of the Early Start Programmes had classrooms within the primary school, they were on the same grounds. This enables the children, the parents and the teachers to remain in close contact with one another. The pre-school and the junior school work together and like Bernstein argues, this enhances the chances of the knowledge benefitting the children throughout their education for longer periods of time. Two of the respondents mentioned that because the primary school was attached to the pre-school they recognise teachers and they are more comfortable with the familiar surroundings.

Six of the respondents replied that they had been very involved throughout the programme. The remaining two worked during the day but they did say that they try to take days off to go on the day trips with the class. The six respondents who were involved all tried to be as much involved as they could be.

They enjoyed the parents room and getting to know the other parents. They discussed ideas, opinions and experiences amongst each other. Again much of the literature discussed the importance of sharing ideas and experiences to benefit all of the parents and the teachers.

Their involvement stretch from participation in the classroom to their attendance on the school trips. Four of the eight respondents spent one to two hours every morning in the classroom, helping their own child and the other children. These mothers were very dedicated to the programme. They truly believed it benefitted their child and themselves. They enjoyed getting to know their child and learning how to co-operate and spend time

with their children. They received a sense of achievement seeing how well their child coped in the classroom. They were able to go home feeling at ease with the situation, their child was comfortable and both the child and parent were very fond of the teacher. Other respondents said they participate when it was their turn on the rota and always went on the school tours. All of the respondents were willing to participate when asked and half were ready to help all the time. As mentioned in the literature review many of these parents have no choice but to go to work everyday. The two parents who worked said they were willing to help more but it was not possible because they had to work. This supports my earlier argument in the literature review about the changing family structure, where the parent has no choice but to go to work.

All of the respondents enjoyed watching their children learn. They all admitted that they also learnt from experiences. All of the parents were provided with times during the day to spend in the classroom and from my results all of the parents did this when it was possible to do so.

Again half of the respondents gave ideas as to how parents could be more involved in their child's schooling. These ideas consisted of more encouragement for the parents to help more in the school and at home. One response was that parents should talk and communicate with teachers and to find out and learn what goes on in the classroom. Another respondent who appeared to be extremely involved in all of her children's education said that she feels more parents in that particular school, need to be encouraged to join the parents association. She is involved in the parents association and she said

there is very little representation of parents. Her view was that they should be encouraged to come and join in the meeting to voice their opinions. From meeting parents in the parents room she saw that many of the parents had strong views that they could voice at the meetings. She enjoys being involved but she would prefer a larger attendance at the meetings.

To conclude this discussion on my interviews I will discuss both the negative and positive information I received. When I asked the questions there was little elaboration from the respondents in school A. They did volunteer to participate but gave many yes and no answers until I pushed them on by asking why. Once I asked why and showed my interest in their opinion they did try and elaborate as much as possible. School B were more inclined to talk to me and explain any reasons for lack of involvement and how much they enjoy the Early Start Programme.

More than half of the respondents participated in the programme and all respondents got involved when possible. All respondents saw the importance of their involvement. All of the literature on early education and its benefits were supported by the results I received from the respondents. They covered the ideas of noticeable differences from their children who did not receive early education. They also supported the view that their involvement is vital to their child's education. They recognise that they are the prime educators of their children. They also included in the last answer that they need to work with the teacher.

All of the responses supported the fact that the classrooms and the teachers were inviting, supportive and very positive. The teachers treated them like important human beings and helped them with their own education and also the education of their child.

None of the parents had negative attitudes towards the Early Start experience. They were all very positive and they spoke very highly of the teachers and the schools.

CHAPTER 5:
METHOD 2: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The second method of research which I used was Participant Observation. This method is suitable for many reasons. This method of participant observation would allow me to sit with the class, the teacher and the parents. Watching their involvement with each other can help to answer many research questions. The day to day teaching could be observed.

“ Participant Observation is a technique to use when you wish to learn from peoples actions and what they do as opposed to what they say they do “ (Kane 1983:53)

Participant Observers are involved in the situation while recording events. The degree of participation may be minimal or extensive. So while observing the classroom situation the observer can participate in what they felt necessary to help them receive more data. The observer can interact face to face and participate with the people being observed. The observer takes on their social roles so that they can obtain as much information as possible. The observer looks, listens, experiences and records.

Another advantage to participant observation as a research technique is that it covers a wide variety of situations and approaches. This observation can be carried out anywhere in a natural setting. So children, parents and teachers can be observed in the classroom, the playground or even while they are waiting outside to go home. So the natural setting also means they do not have to get used to an unusual setting.

(Labovitz 1975 :28)

With observation you can be free to take record of what goes on while you are

watching. You can also do your research in a structured way, the observer can have a list of what they want to see and they can cross it off as the events occur.

The observer can also use participant observation at the beginning of their research to help them choose which topics they want to concentrate on.

“ It can be used as a scanner” (Kane,E 1985 : 55)

The observer's presence means that they are able to perceive the emotional reactions of his or her subjects, which may lead to fruitful hypotheses. By observing over a long period of time a lot of useful information can be obtained. The observer can keep on coming back whereas with interviewing and questionnaires the interviewee can get bored and tired of the research. This can leave the observer with a less informative outcome. On the subject of early intervention programmes, you can identify the progress the children and parents are making at different stages.

The observer is able to record the context, which gives meaning to the respondent's expressions of opinions and values. This is also useful in observing the children's interaction between their parents, the teacher and their peers.

If the observer can establish a good solid relationship with the group, it can be possible that they can ask sensitive questions about their private lifestyles. This is depending on the aspects of the subject's life you are interested in studying.

(Labovitz 1975 :30) So for this research project I can try and find out the data on what makes these children disadvantaged. Information could be gained on the employment

The most general bias to which all observers are subject to and to which the sociologist has given most attention to is the sociocultural bias. This bias is the bias of sharing the ideas and values of a time in history. The observer already has their opinion before they do their investigation. Before the observer begins their study they need to be motivated to look for their biases and uncover them as a continuous process of discovery. For this study the observer could go into the school with preconceptions about the children and the programme they are planning to observe. They might feel that these disadvantaged children cannot be compensated for with education, so the observers attitude can be positive or negative. Whether they are positive or negative has a big influence in which way the research is going to go.

In many observation cases there can be a significant time gap between the occurrence of an event and the recording of this event. It is very difficult to write down everything that the observer sees incase they miss the next event. It is possible to tape the conversations but the observer needs to see the peoples reactions. A video camera may alter the situation and many people are camera shy. They may react differently to the situation with cameras on them.

The observer also has to be prepared to participate in the activities or conversations that are going on around them so again their attention has to be kept on the observation and it is very hard to remember everything that went on during the observation.

So the extra time between stages can cause the loss of vital data. The observer then has to remember and interpret everything that had happened sometime later. The observer has to remember and record the significant details preceding the event. This is vital in

dealing with children. It is hard to keep up with children in many cases so the observer might not always get the appropriate information.

The observers role is to find out what usually happens in the group they are observing and also what happens because of his or her presence. The mere presence of the observer means that movements are made and orientations are developed towards him which might not have occurred if they were not being observed.

With children, their reactions to an observer can vary but with the presence of their usual teacher should help to overcome this disadvantage. As I have mentioned before the observer has to gain the groups trust. But unless the observer knows the groups actions before he or she observes them and also after he or she observes them, it is hard to produce relevant data. (Fredricks, J & Ludtke, H 1975 :30)

The presence of the observer can cause the altering of behaviours and thus cause an alteration of the whole situation and causes the observer to get a totally different picture. (Labovitz & Hagedorn 1975 : 78). Labovitz and Hagedorn 1975, also discuss the loss of objectivity because of over involvement in the group by the observer. The observer can be left waiting for the things he or she wants to see and the event may never happen while they are being observed.

“ This problem is similar to the problems faced by foreigners entering a new culture without knowing the language, the customs, the ways of acting and reasoning.” (Schwartz & Jacobs 1979 : 37)

Schwartz and Jacobs 1979 discuss the principle used by Garfinkel. This principle is that of reflexivity. We can't just describe things, descriptions in the social world, affect social relationships and produce political, moral and social consequences.

Lack of reliability resulting from random observations by the researcher is also a negative side to participant observation. Two observers watching the same groups are very unlikely to perceive and record the same information in the same way.

“ Unreliability comes from selective perception on the part of the observers”(Labovitz & Ludtke 1975 :78)

Each person interprets the same situations differently in most events and would also record them differently because one observer may feel that something is not as important and thus leave it out of their data, while the other observer might feel it is important and add it to their own data.

Participant observation does tell you what people do, but only in the situation where you are given the opportunity to observe. Even when you do get to observe the actions and people you still have to try and make sense of it. (Kane,E 1985)

When the observer first enters a situation they also feel a degree of shyness with the situation. The group to be observed, can be slow to progress at first (Kane,E 1985)
Children find it easier to adapt to a situation so joining in with play activities can help to relieve any awkwardness after a short time. For my third year Sociology Qualitative Research course we also had to carry out a research project and complete the research. I

did my report on the language differences between children aged four and five. The beginning of the observation was a bit awkward but once I began talking to them they adapted to the situation very well and my results were very positive.

The method of participant observation does have negative sides but the positive sides outweigh the negative sides when it comes to the topic I wish to carry out. This method is the best method to get to know the children and parents and the best method to get to know the whole school experience. It means I can enter into their usual atmosphere and watch what it includes and receive enough data to carry out my research fully.

PART 1:

RESULTS OF THE PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

SCHOOL A

When I first arrived in the classroom I felt shy with the situation. I was a stranger to the classroom. This degree of shyness disappeared quickly once the teacher invited me to join in.

For the first half an hour there were three other parents present in the classroom. One mother was helping her child with a jigsaw. She spoke to her child and explained how to match up the pieces. When her child moved on to the next activity his mother got him started and told him that she had to go. She gave him a kiss and said good bye.

While she was involved in her child's activities they were both talking and laughing. Her child was very comfortable with her presence and she was very relaxed and happy being in the classroom situation. My presence did not seem to affect her participation. Once she was gone her child carried on with the activity and coped very well with completing it on his own. He then began to help the other child beside him.

Another mother was helping her daughter with her activity. They were matching colours of cubes with colours of a snake on a card. She left her child to complete it on her own but her mothers presence gave her the confidence to complete it. On many occasions the child would turn to the mother for reassurance, which the mother gave to help her finish the puzzle. Her mother also gave her hints and spoke very calmly to her child. This mother also helped another child on the other side of her.

Once both children were happy and settled she left them to carry on their activity on their own. Her child was comfortable for her mother to leave and carried on playing with the child next to her.

The third mother also helped her child complete an activity. She guided him through the process of matching shapes into the holes that were shaped to match. Many children around seemed to struggle with this activity but this child seemed to understand how to match them with the help of his mother. The child then moved on to choose drawing. Once he had settled into this activity his mother left the classroom.

The classroom situation now had twelve children, one teacher and a care worker. They were all working together finishing their chosen activities.

At this stage I began to help the children with their jigsaws and pictures. Two of the children decided to draw around my hand because it was so much bigger than their own. I was also invited to join in any of the other activities going on. All of the children were able to tell me about the animals in their jigsaws and how they had developed from a baby. Through out the morning I participated in the classroom from story time to singing and dancing with the children.

At the end of the three hours the children's parents and in one case a grandfather arrived to collect the children. The majority of the parents were the mothers of the children. In fact only one father came to collect his daughter who was delighted to see him.

This father also had a younger child with him and began to talk to the teacher. He was saying that the younger daughter would be coming to Early Start the following September. He explained to the teacher that because of what he had learnt from his first experience of Early Start that his younger daughter should be more prepared because he and his girlfriend had taught her the alphabet and her numbers and colours. He had also taught her some of the songs his older daughter had been singing from learning them at Early Start.

He was a very happy man and was very comfortable talking to the teacher. Even though he did not know why I was there he was comfortable to have this conversation. It was very easy to detect his sense of pride for participating in his children's lives. He had successfully educated his younger child with skills he had not used with his older daughter.

All of the parents who collected their children took the time to greet and talk to the teacher. The parents all chatted together and were very comfortable to hold conversations among each other. Most of the conversations were about the sunny weather outside and the sports day that the primary school were having. Even though they were normal conversations, they were all very friendly with each other, and took the time to talk.

SCHOOL B

The day that I chose to visit school B was the last day of term. This was the last day these children would have in Early Start before entering primary school the following September.

I was first introduced to the parents room after completing the interviews. This room was a large colourful classroom. There was no degree of shyness because I had experienced the situation in school A. There was at least one parent of each child. They were all extremely friendly and willing to talk with me and welcomed me to the situation. These parents were not as young as the parents in school A and they gave me more elaborate opinions on the Early Start Programme.

They all sat in a circular shape and were holding many conversations. There was a very relaxed and excited atmosphere around the room. The parents (mainly mothers) were laughing and enjoying their time together. Everybody was comfortable and the atmosphere was very positive. Nobody was left out, everybody was part of the conversation.

I was listening to one of these conversations. This conversation I heard revolved around one of the questions I had asked some of the parents in the interview. One parent was saying that I had asked her if she thought that Early Start was a better way to start education than the way she had before. She told them how she was just thrown into school and was expected to learn without any help. Her parents did not care about her education so she was left to work on her own. The mother beside her agreed that this had

also happened to her and in turn this made her hate school. She said she could not get her parents to help with her homework and found it very difficult. She added that her parents did not have a clue what she did in school, so this makes her want to get more involved in her child's education because she knows how it feels to be left to figure things out on your own. This mother carried onto say that she was very happy to see how excited her own daughter was every morning she came to school. This made her opinion of school change along with the attitude of the caring friendly teachers. Another mother added the fact that her daughter was very sad that today was her last day at Early Start.

The mothers continued to talk about the way it was great to see how happy their children were to come and learn. They spoke about the friendly and colourful atmosphere that their children were greeted with every morning. One father said that it was so different to his day. He remembers his classroom being like going into hospital. It was all dark colours on the walls and all the furniture was the same colour.

The other main topic talked about was how excited they were to see the performance that the children and teachers had prepared for them. Many of the parents had cameras and video cameras ready to record the performance. They spoke about the excitement they had experienced from their children all weekend before the performance.

The teacher then entered the room to call us all into the classroom to join the children. Like children themselves the parents filed into the classroom. Each parent was greeted with hugs and they were told where to sit by their child.

The children sat in a semi circle on their cushions at the top of the room. The parents sat in the spectators area on the children's chairs. They were all very amused at having to sit on the extremely small chairs. It was very visible that all of the parents were very familiar with the room and had obviously spent a lot of time there during the year.

The show was prevented from starting because everybody insisted on waiting for the father of one child. Even though his mothers attendance was present, the child insisted on waiting. Everybody clapped when his father arrived shortly after and he was also greeted by his child.

The performance consisted of groups of three children singing a song. They all then performed a song with matching actions. The parents reacted with enormous rounds of applause and much laughter. I watched the reactions of the parents when their child stood up to sing. They waved and smiled with encouragement to their child.

After the performance they had a graduation ceremony for the children. Each child's name was called out separately and they came up to shake hands and accept their certificate. The certificate stated that they had graduated from Early Start. It was a special moment for the children and it was obvious from the parents reactions that it was also a very special moment for them as well.

As I watched each parents reaction as their child received their certificate, they had expressions of accomplishment and pride. It was obvious they enjoyed the ceremony and were very interested in their child's performance and that they had gained their first

educational base for their future. Their children had experienced one year of education with both the help of the teachers and also their help from home and their parents presence and involvement in the classroom.

After they received their certificates, the teacher called them up again individually to give them a collage made by the teacher of photos of the children throughout the Early Start year. The children were then asked to present these to their parents. The parents accepted the collages with hugs for their children and they congratulated them on their success.

The parents were then invited to have a party on their own in the parents room while the children had their own in the classroom. The parents left smiling, laughing and talking about how wonderful it was to see that they had learnt so many songs. They also spoke about how they had helped and they enjoyed seeing the final outcome.

PART 2:
DISCUSSION OF THE PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION
RESULTS

I feel that along with the results of my interviews I received very positive outcomes from my participant observation. It was difficult to get the same situation in both schools but I still got to observe the parents at the Early Start Programme. As mentioned in my results, in school A I got to observe the parent during the morning of the programme and in school B I got to observe parents in the parents room.

For school A my observation was of three mothers during their child's activity time. This showed me how they were prepared and comfortable to spend time in the classroom. As discussed in the literature review, parents are encouraged to join their children during activities. I observed this activity and noted their willingness and encouragement towards the programme. There were no signs of alienation and this in turn helps the parents to develop a clearer understanding of their child's needs. While they were participating that morning I could see how they were able to help their child overcome any complications they had with completing their activity.

The signs of confidence and positive attitudes were strong from the parents. Again supporting the literature, the programme provides an ideal opportunity for parents to have a pleasant and positive experience of education with their child. Their attendance is optional, so the environment in the classroom was friendly and relaxed. This atmosphere was definitely present in the classroom while I was observing the activities. Their presence in the classroom with their child shows them that their help benefits their child.

As I observed the mornings activities I saw the vast range of toys and educational games that were provided for the children. Both the children and the mothers were thoroughly enjoying carrying out the activities together. There were no signs of anybody feeling uncomfortable or bored. None of the parents were rushing to leave, they all waited until they had settled their child into their activities.

While I observed the parents in school B I could see these parents were in no rush to leave the classroom. Although it was a different situation and they were watching a performance, they were all happy to be there. There was a very strong sense of accomplishment and I could see many of the parents were quite emotional and proud to see their child graduate from the Early Start Programme.

They were all very comfortable and happy to sit on their child's chair and watch the play. It did not appear to be an inconvenience for any of the parents. The parents were all friendly with the teachers and amongst each other. There was at least one parent for each child. Some children had both parents and the grandparents and other siblings present. There was much positive reaction from the parents towards the whole programme. I could see that they felt very involved in the fact that their child had graduated from their first stage of education. They were involved by the teachers when each child gave their parents the photo collage. By doing this the teacher was giving the parents a graduation present. The parents were delighted to receive the collage and enjoyed congratulating their child.

The parents were also included in the day by preparing their own party in the parents room. While the children stayed to celebrate their graduation the parents were also rewarded for their hard work. All of the children showed great excitement to be able to perform for their parents. They were all waving to their parents and giving them hugs and kisses. There was much love and caring shown among the families. The opportunity to see the success their children had gained in a year of education created an excited and satisfied atmosphere.

In school A, as I mentioned in my results, I got to observe the parents when they collected their children. The positive reaction I observed from the father who was telling the teacher how he teaches his younger daughter the alphabet and how he feels he has her more prepared for school than he had his older daughter, proved to me that all these parents need is encouragement and support. They are capable of teaching their children with their own skills and experience. They need to be comforted and reassured that their help and position of prime educator is so important. Previous experiences of the lack of an educator in their younger years at home may discourage them from teaching their children themselves. But in this case this father was very proud of his work and skills and was enjoying helping his children in their education.

In my literature review I refer to the importance of the parents being able to approach the teachers. This father was happy to talk with the teachers and looked very relaxed in doing so. When all of the parents were collecting their children, each one took the time to greet the teacher and chat amongst each other. The teachers talked back to them and

showed a real interest in their lives and you could see their interest in a partnership with these parents. The parents and the teachers both showed me this partnership in action. The parents were open and the teachers were very responsive. This type of relaxed conversation is necessary for them to be able to discuss other educational matters in the future. The teachers have established very strong relationships with these parents. The teachers were also very motherly to many of the young girls who were collecting their children. While the teacher helped them, she also showed a lot of respect for these parents who were now willing and prepared to help their children.

For both schools A and B there was a clear picture of three working relationships which had been well established and developed during the year. I discussed in my literature review the importance of these relationships between the parents and teachers, parent and child and the child and the teacher. All of these relationships were clearly up and running and proving to be a success in these two schools.

Both the teachers of the classes told me that the level of parental involvement in these classes was very high. They had run many courses and had got very positive feedback. They could also see major differences between the children and the parents at the beginning of the year and how they are now at the end of the year.

My observation in the parents room also supports much of my argument in my literature review. The parents discussed their own experiences of how they started education. In this discussion I could see their admiration of the Early Start Programme. Much of the

literature explains how parents from disadvantaged areas also experienced a disadvantaged education.

CHAPTER 6:
CONCLUSION

To conclude my study I feel that I have reinforced my main ideas throughout the thesis. The need for parental involvement in the education of disadvantaged children has been stressed throughout my thesis. In exploring the topic there has been support from all of the literature and information I received from my research.

The benefits of parental involvement gives support and confidence to both parents and children. The Early Start Programme has provided great opportunities to disadvantaged children and it has also displayed the importance of trying to help these children to escape from the cycle of poverty. They are given an equal opportunity in education. The programme provides them with a positive and supportive beginning to education. Many negative attitudes are changed within the family and they are taught how to encourage their children.

These programmes can be enjoyable for the parents. Being the parents of a young child can be isolating experience. They may be living at some distance from family and friends or they may be a single parent, as I have discussed in the literature review. In a group situation all parents can benefit. They are open to a pleasant environment where they can confide in one another, draw on one another's experiences and support one another. It is very reassuring to find that there are other parents with similar experiences, anxieties or problems.

From the Early Start Programme, parents who participate in the programme, gain confidence in themselves as educators of their children. They are taught and gain new

knowledge about themselves, their children and their children's education. From the results of my research we can see how all of the respondents felt they knew their children better and also a lot more about what they learnt at school. They also spoke of improved relationships with their children and the teachers. There was also a greater sense of enjoyment from the time spent with their children.

Children also benefit from increased parental involvement in their education. Studies in reading and maths programmes have shown improvements in achievement levels in children of participating parents. (National Parents Council Primary 1992 :No.7)

These disadvantaged children are provided with chances to experience feelings of success and achievement.

One thing that did stand out to me and again it supports much of the literature was that there was a lack of fathers participating in both schools. There was a large representation of the mothers. This shows that there is a need to encourage the fathers to be as involved as the mothers. But as mentioned in other chapters many of these children do not have father figures in their lives.

When a child sees that their parents are interested in what is going on in their lives, it helps them too to be more positive about learning. They also observe their parents enjoying themselves and being more involved in the children's lives and education.

From the results of my research I could see the enthusiasm from both the parents and the teachers which had visibly rubbed off on the children.

Implications of my research would provide data on the effects of early education for the disadvantaged children. This work on parental involvement and early intervention has already been widely studied across the world. There has been extreme emphasis on the importance of early intervention but it does make me feel that all children of the age of three should be provided with the same opportunity. We have to remember that parental involvement is needed in the education of all children not just the disadvantaged.

I feel that I have proved the main aim of this study. Throughout my study I have shown, agreed with and supported the literature available on the subject of early intervention and parental involvement. I have proved that children need to enter into school with a good educational background, with the encouragement from their home environment and their teachers.

APPENDIX 1:
THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Is this your first experience of having a child in Early Start ? Y / N
 - ◆ If not, how many other children have gone through the Early Start Programme ?
2. Do you have older children who have not been through Early Start ? Y ? N
 - ◆ If yes, what differences do you notice ?
3. Do you think it is important for parents to be involved in this programme ? Y / N
 - ◆ If yes, why ?
4. How involved have you been ?
5. Will you continue to be involved as your child moves into Junior Infants and up through Primary school ?
6. Do you find that the environment in the classroom at Early Start is inviting ? Y / N
 - ◆ If yes, in what way ?
7. Does your child enjoy coming to Early Start ?
8. Have you learnt any new parenting skills by being involved ?
9. Has your attitude to education changed since getting involved here ?
10. Do you believe this programme is a better way to begin school education, than the way you did before ?
11. Would you be more confident now in helping with your child's education ?
12. Do you have any ideas as to how parents could be more involved in their child's schooling ?

APPENDIX 2

RESPONSES TO THE INTERVIEWS

SCHOOL A

Responses from Parent 1

Response to Question 1

Yes.

Response to Question 2

Yes, I have two older children. I do not really notice any real differences between the children because the two older ones went to pre-school in the community.

Response to Question 3

Yes, I feel that it is very important that parents become involved because I like to be able to keep an eye on the teacher. It also gives me the chance to watch how my child behaves and what he learns.

Response to Question 4

I have been on all the day trips and I help when the teacher asks me too.

Response to Question 5

No, but if I am asked I would be willing to help.

Response to Question 6

Yes, it is lovely to go into the classroom. The toys and the colours are my favourite. The most inviting thing has to be the teacher and the atmosphere that she makes.

Response to Question 7

Yes, he loves coming here everyday.

Response to Question 8

No

Response to Question 9

Yes, it is more interesting and friendly.

Response to Question 10

Yes, definitely, I was thrown into school, I did not know what I was supposed to do.

Response to Question 11

Yes.

Response to Question 12

No.

SCHOOL A

Responses from Parent 2

Response to Question 1

Yes.

Response to Question 2

No, this is my only child.

Response to Question 3

Yes I feel that it is very important that parents become involved because I can see what my child does everyday in school. I also like being able to see the way the whole thing works.

Response to Question 4

I like to try and spend a hour or two everyday if I can. I have also spent a lot of time in the parents room with the other parents.

Response to Question 5

Oh yes definitely, when ever it is possible.

Response to Question 6

Yes, it is so much more colourful than it was when I was in school.

Response to Question 7

Yes, she loves playing with the other children and she is very fond of her teacher.

Response to Question 8

Yes, I think I have got a lot more patient with her than I was before.

Response to Question 9

Yes, the teacher is so much more friendlier than any teacher I ever had.

Response to Question 10

Yes, definitely my parents did not really know what I did everyday.

Response to Question 11

Yes, I like to help her with things she does at home.

Response to Question 12

I am involved with the parents association and there is very little representation. A lot of parents are afraid to get involved and I think they need more reassurance that their opinion is valued.

SCHOOL A

Responses from Parent 3

Response to Question 1

No, I have two other children who have gone through the programme as well.

Response to Question 2

No.

Response to Question 3

Yes, I think that it really helps to get to know your child and this helps me as well, I think I know my child a lot better now.

Response to Question 4

I am always willing to help and the teacher knows that. I have been on all the school tours and I really enjoyed them, it is a fun day for the parents and the children.

Response to Question 5

I have not been so far with the older two.

Response to Question 6

Yes, I love all the toys and activities. The room is also painted in nice bright colours.

Response to Question 7

Yes.

Response to Question 8

I am much more helpful and I find it easier to get things done with my child.

Response to Question 9

Yes, I used to hate school, the teachers never helped me.

Response to Question 10

Yes, definitely.

Response to Question 11

Yes, I like to help him with anything he is doing at home.

Response to Question 12

I think that parents need to talk more to teachers. Basically there needs to be more communication, so that the parents can be aware of what is going on.

SCHOOL A

Responses from Parent 4

Response to Question 1

Yes.

Response to Question 2

Yes, I have four older children and this child at Early Start

Response to Question 3

Yes I feel that it is very important that parents become involved because I like to be able to keep an eye on the teacher. It also gives me the chance to watch how my child behaves and what he learns.

Response to Question 4

I try to stay around for an hour a day.

Response to Question 5

Yes.

Response to Question 6

Yes, I like the layout of the classroom. The teacher is not at a big table at the top of the classroom, the way it was when I was at school.

Response to Question 7

Yes.

Response to Question 8

I have four older children so I think I learnt my skills from the experiences with them.

Response to Question 9

No, because the older ones were at playschool before.

Response to Question 10

Yes, definitely.

Response to Question 11

Yes.

Response to Question 12

No.

SCHOOL B

Responses from Parent 5

Response to Question 1

Yes.

Response to Question 2

Yes, I have older children. The main differences I see is that my child is more involved in the classroom and with his school work.

Response to Question 3

Yes, it is easier for me to learn what is going on in the classroom and I can see how to help and teach my child. It gives me a better understanding of my child's schooling.

Response to Question 4

Not much at all because I have to work everyday but I do get time off when it is necessary.

Response to Question 5

I will try to.

Response to Question 6

Yes, the teachers spend time to greet you and make sure that you are welcome in the classroom. They are really nice.

Response to Question 7

Yes, she is always excited coming to school.

Response to Question 8

No, I have older children so I think I learnt my skills from experiences with them.

Response to Question 9

Yes, this programme really makes you feel appreciated. The work you do with your child is really appreciated.

Response to Question 10

Yes, definitely, it is just so much more inviting.

Response to Question 11

Yes, it has helped me to help al of my children at home with their school work. Even if I think I do not know an answer, I am now more inclined to have a go at it.

Response to Question 12

They just need to be shown how to help more and they need a more encouragement.

SCHOOL B

Responses from Parent 6

Response to Question 1

Yes.

Response to Question 2

No.

Response to Question 3

Yes, because it helps you to get to know your child better. I have noticed that it helped my child to settle very quickly on the programme. When I am in the classroom I can see what goes on and what they learn.

Response to Question 4

I work everyday so it is hard to get as involved as I would like to be.

Response to Question 5

Yes, if that is possible. I might not be free to come into the school but I will be involved at home.

Response to Question 6

Oh yes, I love the interaction with the teachers. We can approach them about anything and I think they feel the same. They are really like mothers to us.

Response to Question 7

Yes, she is up on time every morning and always looking forward to school.

Response to Question 8

I feel that I am very helpful when my child is doing anything.

Response to Question 9

Yes, it is more inviting and I understand more than I used too.

Response to Question 10

Yes, it is more interesting and fun. Their teachers are friendly unlike the teachers I had.

Response to Question 11

Yes.

Response to Question 12

They need to know that their child needs their help through their education.

SCHOOL B

Responses from Parent 7

Response to Question 1

Yes.

Response to Question 2

Yes, I have two older children. This child at the Early Start is definitely more developed and I think he is brighter.

Response to Question 3

Yes, parents involvement gives the child confidence and I am able to see what goes on in the classroom. I can see how my child copes with learning and we can identify problems.

Response to Question 4

I try to be present every morning to help my child and the other children. I am very involved because I really enjoy it and I know my child loves when I stay.

Response to Question 5

Yes, I am already involved with my older children's education in primary school.

Response to Question 6

Yes, I find it very inviting. The whole atmosphere is so relaxed and easy going. The small numbers in the class is also easier for each child to get enough attention from the teacher. Everybody is just so happy in there.

Response to Question 7

Yes, it was so different with my older children, when I was bringing them too school they always complained.

Response to Question 8

Yes, I have learnt to be more patient. I also feel that I have more discipline in my house and I am stronger with my rules.

Response to Question 9

No.

Response to Question 10

Yes.

Response to Question 11

No.

Response to Question 12

No.

SCHOOL B

Responses from Parent 8

Response to Question 1

Yes.

Response to Question 2

Yes, I have three older children. I just think the programme is brilliant. My child is more developed than the older ones were at her age.

Response to Question 3

Yes, there is so much more communication with your child and the teacher. You get to know your child better.

Response to Question 4

Very, I spend a couple of hours a week in the classroom and the parents room. I have also been on all the school trips.

Response to Question 5

Yes.

Response to Question 6

Yes, the classroom is a friendly, encouraging and welcoming place everyday.

Response to Question 7

Yes, I never hear any complaints. All of the children love their teachers.

Response to Question 8

No, I have older children.

Response to Question 9

No, well maybe, I do feel more welcome.

Response to Question 10

Yes, I did not know what I was supposed to do, I went straight from being a home everyday.

Response to Question 11

Yes, I enjoy trying to answer some of my older children's questions, even though I sometimes do not have a clue.

Response to Question 12

No.

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