

**APPLYING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY TO THE PROCESS OF
PARENTING PROGRAMMES**

PARENTING PROGRAMMES: A PIECE IN THE EDUCATION JIGSAW?

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to gain insight into the nature of parent education outcomes, as evidenced through the experiences of the participants in the Incredible Years Parenting Programme. The parenting programmes are delivered within the realms of a home/school/community model and the study investigates the potential of the parenting programmes to build relationships between parents and mainstream education. It explores the relevance of transformative learning theory to the process of the learning experienced by the participants and finds that the theory can be applied. The research comprises a narrative inquiry of the experiences of parents who had completed the twelve week parenting programme locating the inquiry in the home (personal), school (educational) and the community (where all primary education comes under the Department of Education, DEIS initiative). It finds that the programme produces positive changes through learning key parenting skills and that the positive personal development experience can be attributed primarily to the community education delivery process. In conclusion this thesis recommends greater dialogue between the ideologies and practices of community education, parenting programmes and mainstream education.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE	6
INTRODUCTION.....	6
Background and Context.....	7
Parenting support: parenting programmes	11
Parental involvement in their children’s education.....	14
A home/school/community model: the rationale	16
CHAPTER TWO	20
LITERATURE REVIEW	20
Introduction.....	20
Parenting programmes within the Community Education Sector.....	21
Applying Transformative learning to the Parenting Programmes	23
Conclusion	32
CHAPTER THREE	33
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	33
Introduction.....	33
Theoretical paradigm/framework.....	34
Research strategies.....	41
Analysis of data.....	44
CHAPTER FOUR	45
FINDINGS.....	45
Introduction.....	45
Reflections on participation on the programme	48
Learning from the programme	50
Relationship with the school.....	59
Summary of findings.....	61
CHAPTER FIVE	62
ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION	62
Introduction.....	62
Reflections on participation on the programme	63
Learning from the programme	64
Relationship with the school (mainstream education)	66
Conclusion	70
BIBLIOGRAPHY	73

ACRONYMS

CFSA	Child and Family Support Agency
DEIS	Delivering Equality in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland
HSCLC	Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator
HSE	Health Service Executive
IY	Incredible Years
NEWB	National Education Welfare Board
NPC	National Parents Council
SCP	School Completion Programme
SOLAS	Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I have worked for many years in the community/education sector as an activist involved in many initiatives to address educational disadvantage. This thesis will focus on one of those initiatives, group parenting education programmes. Educational disadvantage is a complex phenomenon, intrinsically linked to economic, social and cultural factors which cannot be viewed in isolation from the social exclusion, poverty and inequality experienced by many communities in society (O'Donoghue, 1999).

My study will inquire into the extent to which community based parenting programmes have the potential to impact upon existing measures to combat educational disadvantage in a community where formal education providers are banded in the DES (2005) programme Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). The parenting programmes are part of a complex community change initiative targeting children, families and a community to improve education and wellbeing outcomes for all. It is hoped that this study will go towards clarifying my research question: *In what way do parenting programmes delivered within the realms of a home/school/community model build relationships between parents and mainstream education?*

Centrality of family

Children's first educators are their families. Their homes are in many ways the most important setting for their early care and education. Under the Constitution of Ireland (1937) article 42 states:

The state acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide

according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.

(The Irish Constitution, 1937, Article, 42).

While traditionally parents were only responsible for their children's basic needs, parental responsibilities have increased to include a learning environment, co-operating with and supporting the school and fulfilling their special role in their children's development (DES, 1995, p. 9; 1996, p. 14). Most parents, the Commission on the Family noted (1998, p. 85), learn as they go along, influenced by the way they were brought up, by what they have read and their observations of others.

The latest study of educational attainment in OECD (2011) countries finds that fifteen year olds whose parents often read books with them in early childhood have markedly higher PISA scores than those whose parents read little with them. The findings hold true regardless of the family's socio-economic background. It is essential for any measure to combat educational disadvantage to proactively and dynamically provide parents and carers with the knowledge and support they need to parent effectively. Aspects of parenting such as setting boundaries, modelling appropriate behaviour have a significant impact on children's self-esteem, behaviour, emotional self-regulation and long term development.

Background and Context

The parenting programmes are delivered across six primary schools based in a suburban area of North Dublin which is designated as "disadvantaged" (Hasse and Pratschke, 2008). The parenting programmes are delivered as part of an Incredible Years Home School Service with the overall aim of improving learning and wellbeing outcomes for children and families in the area. The service is delivered in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System

Theory (1979) which embeds the parent and the child within complex systems of multi-level, multi-directional influences that interact and thus affect the child and their immediate family system.

Incredible Years Training Series

The study is located in the Webster-Stratton Incredible Years training series which comprises school and home programmes aimed at supporting positive emotional and social development in primary-school aged children. There are three interlocking components to Incredible Years – the Child Programme, the Teacher Programme and the Parenting Programme. The intent is that the delivery of the Incredible Years Parenting Programme is part of an integral component of an intervention, while aimed at supporting parents and developing their parenting capacities, it goes beyond this focus encompassing all parties involved in the child’s schooling to include the teachers and the children. The thinking behind this approach is that all these people are part of the “indivisible context shaping the child’s self concept and this is taken to be the engine room of the child’s educational progress” (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003 p. 80).

The version of the programme under consideration is the Incredible Years BASIC Parenting Programme which consist twelve weekly, two-hour, parent-group training sessions guided by behavioural and social learning principles and delivered by trained group leaders who receive regular supervision. The programme utilises a collaborative approach and presents a structured sequence of sessions. Topics include learning to play with the child, increasing positive behaviour through praise and incentives, and managing non-compliance and aggression through limit setting, ignoring and other strategies. Sessions use videos, role-play, modelling, group discussions and homework to help parents practise and adopt positive parenting strategies (Webster-Stratton et al., 1998).

Purpose of the study

The study seeks to examine the nature of outcomes that accrue from parent education programmes by examining holistically the structure and essence of the experience for the participants (Patton, 1990). The purpose is not to evaluate the particular programme but to gain insight into how participants in this education programme experienced the programme; the goal is to conceptualise the nature of the learning outcomes from the perspective of the learner. Thus I was drawn to the literature of the transformative theorists namely Mezirow and to a lesser extent Freire, whose philosophies of education signifies adult learning as a transformative process.

Background to the research process

The focus of the research was on parental experience and learning from participation on the parenting programme. The research participants were purposefully selected through a qualitative framework seeking to uncover information about their experiences. In-depth semi-structures interviews were carried out with five parents, a parent programme group leader and a Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator. Six parents currently participating on a programme participated in a focus group session. The study comprised a narrative inquiry of the experiences of five parents who completed the twelve week parenting programme locating the inquiry in a framework of overlapping spheres of influence focussed on the three areas of the home (personal), school (educational) and community (where all primary education comes under the Department of Education DEIS initiative).

In contrast to this study, several studies have examined outcomes of specific parenting education programmes. Many of these quantitative studies have adopted principally positivist influenced perspectives aimed at identifying measurable outcomes. Research has primarily focussed on child-related outcomes (Mc Gilloway et al 2009), parent related outcomes such

as parental effectiveness (Kilroy et.al., 2010), family - related outcomes such as changes in the family's economic and life circumstances (Kiernan and Huerta 2008). Other qualitative studies (Furlong and Mc Gilloway, 2011) assessed the experiences of Irish parents with a view to understanding how and why the programme works, or does not work, within disadvantaged settings. I am taking a post-positivist stance thus looking at the nature and meaning of the experience of participating on the programme from the perspective of parents living in a disadvantaged community. This stance led me to the literature on community education.

Limitations of the research

There are four main limitations:

Firstly this study had a small number of participants; seven took part in semi-structured interviews and the focus group comprised six parents. Secondly, the representation of the participants was mostly female, however one male took part in the semi-structured interviews and there was one male in the focus group. This breakdown of male/ female is typical of the gender ratios in Incredible Years parenting programmes. Thirdly, the parents who took part in the semi-structured interviews self-selected to participate on Incredible Years parenting programmes. This is not typical for all parents participating on programmes as some are referred through social workers, family support agencies and court orders. This was addressed in the make-up of the focus group where a number of the parents had been referred to the programme. Fourthly, the research participants were known to me in a professional capacity, therefore I ensured that I had never led a parenting programme within which they were members.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is presented in five chapters. Chapter one introduces the parenting programmes and provides an overview of the social and policy contextual considerations. Chapter two explores theories of transformative learning and provides the theoretical framework within which the themes of the research were developed. It identifies community education processes and principles as central to the delivery of the parenting programmes. Chapter three outlines the methodological viewpoint and the research strategies applied to gather data for this inquiry. The findings from the fieldwork are presented in Chapter four. Chapter Five provides an analysis of the significance of the findings of the research. It finds that transformative learning is an overarching theme in the delivery of community based parenting programmes and that locating these programmes in local primary schools leads to enhanced home/school/community relationships.

Parenting support: parenting programmes

Tracing the provision of parenting programmes: the emerging model

Traditionally, the main providers of family support services were voluntary and community groups, often tied to the Catholic Church. Clavero (2001) in reviewing Irish policy on family support services within an international framework contends:

Family support services, including parenting programmes, follow this pattern: statutory provision is insufficient and where available, limited to families and children who are either disadvantaged or deemed at risk.

(Clavero, 2001, p. 45).

Clavero (2001) continues to elaborate that family support and related services are scattered amongst government departments working in isolation from each other at policy and service delivery levels. This lack of inter-departmental co-ordination has begun to be addressed in

recent years with a re-structuring of government departments, the introduction of a Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the appointment of a Minister for Children (2012). This appointment indicates a commitment to providing leadership on children's issues and is an opportunity to facilitate joined up policy making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children.

An early forerunner was the inter-departmental National Children's Strategy, *Our Children — Their Lives*, published in November 2000 following a period of extensive consultation with parents and groups working with children, as well as with children themselves. The strategy adopted a 'whole child perspective', recognising the multidimensional nature of all aspects of children's lives. Under the National Children's Strategy the delivery of parenting programmes was named as an action. An interim progress report was published in 2005. In the Progress Report (2005) Objective L (No. 109) SUPPORTING FAMILIES LOCALLY:

Quality parenting programmes are to be made available to all parents, with special emphasis on the needs of fathers, lone parents, ethnic minority groups, including Travellers and marginalised groups. As part of a policy of ending physical punishment, parenting courses focus on alternative approaches to managing difficult behaviour in children.

(Office of the Minister for Children, 2005, p. 85).

Reviewing progress, the indicators reveal there was a substantial expansion of parenting programmes being delivered through the Health Service Executive (HSE) Springboard Projects. Under the Department of Social and Family Affairs funding for Family Services Projects provided for forty-seven parenting programmes in 2004.

Looking at this report in 2013, the figures for this particular objective focus on outputs achieved (number of parent programmes delivered) as opposed to the action being lead by measurable outcomes for children and families. This tension between output/outcome is highlighted in a review of the strategy undertaken by the Children's Rights Alliance in 2011.

The purpose of the review was to assess whether The National Children’s Strategy had delivered on its objectives. Its intent was to be reflective as opposed to making recommendations for the next phase of the strategy. Under the objective “Quality parenting courses available to all parents” the authors observed that while a variety of parenting courses had been made available it was difficult to measure the impact of this action on the lives of children as indicators of change had not been included in the action (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2011).

Lobby groups, such as Start Strong, have advocated that parent supports need to be mainstreamed citing evidence that while there are many parenting courses and supports available in Ireland, operating on a pilot basis, they identify that there is no national policy framework for the delivery of parenting programmes. Thus availability varies with the main delivery of programmes targeted in “disadvantaged areas”. “In general, there is no co-ordination to ensure availability to all families who want or need parenting supports.” (Start Strong, Policy Brief, August 2012). Start Strong argue not only is there a lack of co-ordination there are also many funding streams and thus with no clear government led policy, the quality of programmes being delivered also varies with some having a strong evidence base and some do not.

Findings in the Growing Up in Ireland study (GUI 2012): *How Families Matter for the Social and Emotional Outcomes of 9-year-old children* (Report 4) identifies “family processes” matter more for children’s outcomes than “family structure” or “income level” supporting the earlier criticism of targeting programmes at disadvantaged, lone parent and fathers. This finding supports the argument for publicly funded parenting programmes, which address these “processes”, operate as a mainstream public service rather than a local initiative operating on a pilot basis. “In addition to child-focussed programmes, programmes for

parents may help to improve parenting, which in turn will have positive effects on children's outcomes". (GUI, 2012, p. 57).

Parental involvement in their children's education

Policy overview

Over the last twenty five years, the Irish Education system has changed from one where parents had no say in policy formation to one where they were expected to be involved both locally and nationally. This shift was due mainly to the formation of the National Parents Council (NPC) which was established as a charitable organisation in 1985 gaining statutory recognition in the Education Act 1998. The NPC services are aimed at empowering parents so that they can support their children in all aspects of education. With the formation of the NPC, parents were actively involved in the processes which led to the development of the legislation Education and Welfare Act (2000) and The New Primary School Curriculum (1999). Parents now have the right to sit on School Boards of Management, form Parents Associations and to be kept informed of their children's progress and all matters relating to the school. These relatively recent national policy agendas of home-school partnership challenge the largely taken for granted professional and organisational structures: schools responsible for the organisation of school life and the implementation of the curriculum, parents are responsible for their children outside of school hours and for supplementing state aid to schools through voluntary contributions, unpaid labour and other forms of parental involvement (Bleach 2010).

In Bleach's (2010) research into parental involvement in schools, from the perspective of parents, the findings reveal disparities between current policy and practice. In her evaluation of the national policy of parental involvement in their children's education and schools under this policy of "educational partnership" (defined as the relationship between parents, the

school, the state and the church in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school) the findings revealed “Most participants had no knowledge of the partnership process at national level. Parents felt that they had very little influence either locally or nationally.” (Bleach, 2012 p. 242). While at policy and legislative level there is a statement of intent of the existence of a home-school-state partnership. This is reiterated in a recent policy document of the National Parents Council Primary (2012) which states “the Education Act 1998 must be fully implemented, in all schools, regarding parents’ involvement in their children’s education” (p. 17).

The role of the NPC has been critiqued by Mac Ruairc (2009) in terms of its effectiveness in achieving broad parental participation and in its lack of analysis of the patterns of socio-economic classification of school communities affiliated to its organisation. From my perspective working in a community of eleven primary schools there is little evidence of an active NPC other than some inputs by the organisation at “Primary to Post-Primary” school transition meetings for parents (these meeting were initiated by my colleague). The main initiative linked to parental participation and funded by the Department of Education and Skills is the Home School Community Liaison Scheme established during the school year 1990-1991. The rationale behind the scheme is based on the premise that parents from working class backgrounds have been “absent from educational debate and decision making” because they have been seen as unable to participate (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002 p. 36) as cited in Mac Ruairc (2009).

Therefore, there is an opportunity to investigate the potential of community based parenting programmes as a mechanism of building parental relationships with schools in a community where their children attend schools banded in the DEIS initiative. The DEIS programme (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) was launched in 2005 and is intended to be

an integrated approach to educational inclusion. The initiative specifically refers to promoting parental involvement and forging closer ties between the school and the wider community, enhancing quality teaching and learning through curricular reform and an environment that promotes equal opportunity for all children regardless of background or family income (DES, 2005).

A home/school/community model: the rationale

Parenting programmes have been identified as an important means of supporting parents in improving practices and attitudes, with the aim of enhancing child outcomes. Borrowing from behavioural and social learning perspectives, the key aim of such programmes are to enable parents to learn positive, non-coercive discipline, and to improve the quality of their relationship with their children (Taylor and Biglan, 1998). “Parents can sometimes have negative interaction with their child’s teacher which can strain the relationship and collaboration between school and home” (Webster-Stratton and Herbert, 1994, p. 23). In contrast, where strong home-school links are formed, children benefit from parents’ interest in, and support for, their academic and social performance. Consequently, the implementation of a multi-level, multi-system approach to support positive parenting is recognised as the most effective approach (Maton, Schellenbach, Leadbeater & Solarz, 2004), cited in (Morgan and Espey, 2012, p. 17). Some Local Authorities in England and Wales have developed school- based provision for parent programmes, seeing it as a successful way of bridging home and school in attempts to improve behaviour and attendance (Hallam et al, 2007). Dyson and Robinson (1999) as cited in Desforges and Abouchar (2003) conducted a systematic review of the literature on of the impact of school/community links, while findings were inconclusive with regard to any measureable effect on pupil attainment, they did find that there are significant benefits to schools; their approaches are likely to be welcomed by

parents and community members and contribute to generating positive attitudes amongst both adults and the school's pupils.

Adult and community education and parenting programmes: the relationship

The Department of Education and Science (2000) offers two definitions of community education. It is presented as an extension of the service provided by second and third level education institutions into the wider community. It is also defined as:

It assumes a different character to all other forms of formal education, not merely in terms of its content but in terms of the relationships between participants themselves, between the participants and tutors.

(Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 111).

The more recent Community Education Network (CEN, 2011) definition of community education emphasises its catalytic nature focussing on it being community-led and valuing the lived experiences of individuals:

Through its ethos and holistic approach community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a social teaching and learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based.

(Community Education Network, 2011, p.3).

Community education has been specified as taking place in "certain types of community based settings, often outside the framework of educational institutions focussed on priority groups for widening participation and not usually focussed on job-specific vocational purposes. The intention "is to have an impact on neighbourhood renewal and on regeneration at individual and at community levels" (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003, p. 71). The more recent Aontas (2009) publication *Community Education: More than just a course* adds to the literature around outcomes of community education; the fact that community education of its very nature does not stem from a rigid concept of curriculum but instead prioritises

engagement and collaboration. The research analysed the provision of adult community education in terms of meetings its goals to address educational disadvantage (human capital) and tracking the wider benefits of learning (social capital). One significant finding from the research was the importance placed on the social dimension outcomes of community education (Aontas, 2009). Fitzsimons (2012) another feature of community education is that it attracts participants from disadvantaged communities characterised by high density social housing, disproportionate unemployment rates and a population where many underachieve at school when set against meritocracy's yardstick for progression to Higher Education (p. 30).

The parenting programmes of this study are delivered in community settings; parent rooms in schools. The key features of these learning sessions include relaxed environment, strengths-based approach, bringing fun into learning, increasing parents' confidence and know-how, sharing experiences and challenges, raising the profile and participation of parents in their children's education and in schools. As the programmes operates under a funded programme of prevention and early intervention (PEIP) there is the opportunity to bring into practice some of the community education policies such as "in engaging in partnerships with the statutory sector" (DES, 2000, p. 118).

There has been considerable change with community education in recent years from the absorption of Community Development Projects into Local Area Partnership Companies, changing economic contexts, reduced funding, increased demand on services, changes to the FETAC process; all in addition to the existing challenges for community education, as it seeks to retain its identity in the context of the development of SOLAS and the new integrated Further Education and Training Service (Community Education Network, 2012). The Further Education and Training Bill (2013) sets out key milestones and identifies stakeholders involved in shaping the new Further Education and Training service. Many

community education providers outside of the existing statutory sector have raised concerns regarding their position within the proposed legislation and take the view that the role of community education within the new structures is weak and insecure. This has serious implications for the sustainability of the services by community education providers in the delivery of education programmes and in the delivery of the parenting programmes of this study, post funding under PEIP.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the focus of the thesis placing the delivery of parenting programmes within three overlapping spheres of influence; the home, school and the community. The disparities between current policy and practice regarding parental involvement in primary education were highlighted. Community education has been identified as the lens within which my research question is addressed and this is further discussed in chapter two.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews two strands of literature, community education and transformative learning. I am focussing on these areas in the hope that the learning from this review will inform the response to my research question: *In what way do parenting programmes, delivered within the realms of home/school/community model build relationships between parents and mainstream education?*

The initial part of this chapter locates the delivery of parenting programmes within the discourse of community education. Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1991) is presented and infused with its application to the Incredible Years Parenting Programme. Transformation theory is primarily a psychological theory, focussing attention on the intrapersonal dimensions of learning and therefore it fits with the educational ideology of the parent programme model which is also rooted in psychology. Mezirow's transformative theory of adult education is critiqued under the themes; Transformative learning and parenting programmes, transformative learning as a critical theory of self and transformative learning in discourse.

The latter part of this chapter offers an understanding of society and the role of education within the three interlocking spheres of the home, the school and the community. Being mindful of the social context within which the parenting programmes are delivered Bourdieu's (1977, 1997) concept of "social and cultural capital and habitus" explores the constructs of society.

Parenting programmes within the Community Education Sector

In reviewing the literature on Community Education I have found that the ideology and principles of Community Education can inform the processes of delivery of parenting programmes. The concept of community education programmes did not develop in a vacuum, rather community education has become synonymous with locally based women's groups which have been forming in increasing numbers since the 1980s. Connolly (2003) "generally, these groups, are considered to hold non-hierarchical, autonomous, participatory and empowerment goals and structures" (p. 196). This ideology is included in the feminist critique of community education (DES, 2000) taking the lived experience of the participants as the common starting point combined with a non-hierarchical structure "a blurring of distinction between the *teacher and the taught*" (p. 111).

Community education is acknowledged as a key agent in addressing the needs of communities and marginalised groups in an integrated way (Department of Education and Science 2000, p.111-120). The White Paper recognises the influence of community education on the broader development of adult education, and the historic relevance of community based women's groups. It also acknowledges the far reaching nature of community education in developing new models of education and "in taking the lived experience of the participants as a starting point" (Department of Education and Science, p. 110). In terms of method and content this broad ideology could also be applied to the parenting programmes of this study. The programmes are delivered in community settings; parent rooms in local schools. The sessions include relaxed environment, strengths-based approach, bringing fun into learning, increasing parent's confidence, sharing experiences and challenges, raising the profile and participation of parents in their children's education in schools. Lynch and Lodge (2002) while researching the existence of equality and power in schools cite that much education

theory and sociological research gives little or no attention to the “affective aspects of the learning environment.” (p. 11). They continue “the denial of the emotional dimensions of the learning process means a denial of the totality of what it is to be a teacher and a learner in the first instance.” (p. 11). Adult education is most effective when it encompasses the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of learning.

Tett (2010) challenges us as providers to view community education as being “about the development of knowledge and skills, building human relationships, and the engagement of people in understanding the wider social forces that impact (lives) both locally and globally.” (p.103). This social activist dimension of community education is evidenced within the ideology of the Department of Education and Science: Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (2000) where alongside the ideology there co-exists a call for a challenging process of individual and collective empowerment. In outlining the key characteristic of the community education sector the paper states:

Its collective social purpose and inherently political agenda-to promote critical reflection, challenge existing structures, and promote empowerment, improvement so that participants are enabled to influence the social context in which they live.

(DES, 2000, p. 113).

This is reiterated by Aontas (2004) in defining community education it advocates “not only about providing part of a service, but about creating a model of education that will lead eventually to social change.” (p. 18). The report calls for community education as an initiative to influence change through the building of parental capacity at local level and supporting collaborative approaches to schools. The delivery of the parenting programmes within a framework of home/school/community collaborative model speaks to this agenda.

The intent is to build social capital – a network of relationships that allows a community to be cohesive and purposeful. Freire referred to this social capital as his “theory of dialogical

cultural action” (1996, p. 43) with the constituent elements of co-operation, unity for liberation, organisation and cultural synthesis. The programmes are mainly concerned with real life situations thus providing the group leader with the opportunity of setting what Freire contends to be transforming goals as opposed to reforming goals. However, while critical consciousness is a process in which parents are encouraged to analyse their reality to become more aware of the constraints on their lives, Freire believes it should also be transformative, that is it also means taking action to transform their situation. “They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it” (Freire, 1996, p. 27).

Applying Transformative learning to the Parenting Programmes

Transformational learning centres on the cognitive process of learning. The mental construction of experience, inner meaning and reflection are common components of this approach (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). In my reading of Mezirow, his transformative learning theory is appealing and I believe it is relevant to the process of the delivery of the parenting programmes where the process is one of “active participation” taking the real experiences of parents and their relationships with their children as a starting point or as Mezirow would refer to them as the learner’s “frames of reference”. Drawing on Habermas, Mezirow re-interpreted emancipatory action as adult perspective transformation and linked this to contemporary adult educational ideas of self-directed learning and androgogy (Brookfield, 2005, p. 222). “A frame of reference is a structure of assumptions or taken for granted beliefs we have about reality.” (Mezirow 1995, p. 11). This is how we interpret the world and create experience. “Transformative learning experiences are emancipatory in that they free learners from the constraints and distortions of their worn frames of reference.” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 11).

Central to Mezirow's transforming frames of reference are the concepts of critical reflection and collaborative discourse, which question the basis for assumptions. Collaborative discourse requires freedom, trust, participatory democracy, tolerance, solidarity and respect for other viewpoints. It is the role of the educator to create the conditions which allows this discourse to occur. Mezirow's humanistic tradition can be compared with the delivery of the parenting programmes in that it is the responsibility of the individual to exercise his or her right to learn as an adult in a situation where the group leader has empathy with and trust in the learner and works in an open caring and non-judgemental way (Tennant, 2006). The next section examines and critiques three themes: critical reflection, social action, collaborative discourse/power.

Mezirow critical reflection and context

The process of transformative learning is firmly anchored in life experiences. All human beings have a need to understand their experiences, to make sense of what is happening in their lives. It is through engaging with the life experience to make meaning that there is an opportunity for a change in perspective. Mezirow believes that adult educators have a responsibility to promote this kind of critical reflection (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Mezirow's (1995) transformation theory is an explanation of how our frames of reference influence the way we make meaning and how they may be transformed to empower adult learners. The process of transforming our frames of reference begins with critical reflection and it is through critical reflection we can change the way we see the content of a problem or see our process of problem solving. Mezirow (2003) "We can become critically reflective of the assumptions we or others make when we learn to solve problems instrumentally or when we are involved in communicative learning." (p. 7). He continues "self-reflection can lead to significant personal transformations." (p. 7). Through a collaborative learning process parents

on the programmes often refine the way they view or feel about their parenting practices through conversations of their “meaning schemes” that is their beliefs, feelings, judgements and attitudes that shape their interpretation of themselves as parents.

Pietrykowski (1998) identifies that it is at this point in the learning the emancipatory impulse is identified by the adult educator who attempts to release it in the adult learner, by setting a desired goal named by the “expert”. Pietrykowski (1998) raises the question “is it the correct role of the educator to “get learners to agree with” his or her political beliefs?” (p. 2). This can raise ethical questions for parent programme group leaders are we setting “good parenting” goals that are value and power laden?

Newman (2012) considers the self, its forms of learning, and the development of consciousness as largely arising from and supported by their social and material contexts. He raises the idea of transformative learning theory as a critical theory of self. It is in this dimension of Mezirow’s theory of learning that flaws begin to become apparent when applying it to the parenting programmes. Within this theory it is the responsibility of the learner to engage in self reflection with little regard for the social context of the parents in the parenting programme.

Merriam & Caffarella (1999) criticise Mezirow’s theory as reflecting the values of the dominant culture in our society and its failure to explore the tension between the individual and the socio-cultural, political and historical context. Mezirow (1978) developed his theory of transformative learning based on research in the early 1970s into women participating in college re-entry programmes. These women had returned to learning in a period marked by the growing force of the women’s movement. Newman (2012) argues that the “glorious stories of emancipation” of these women did not occur in a vacuum, in effect he suggests that

it could be equally argued they were “not subjects but objects swept along by the flow of social history, as we all are much of the time, changed by accident and not by design.” (p. 39).

Clark and Wilson (1991) pointed out that meaning of any experience cannot be understood apart from its context. They asserted that the political and social systems in which people negotiate personal change “actually provide.. meaning” to the discourse that occurs in service to that change (p. 83). With regard to the parents of my study structural inequalities such as uneven distribution of stable employment, good housing and equal access to resources such as school, healthcare and leisure and cultural facilities, as well as the burden of social inequalities need to be called into account. Studies of parenting in socio-disadvantaged circumstances highlight the need to be mindful of the context within which the parenting programmes are delivered. Kiernan and Huerta (2008) examined the extent to which economic circumstances in infancy and mother’s mental health well-being are associated with children’s cognitive development and behaviour problems at age three years, and what part parenting behaviours and attitudes play in mediating these factors. Their analysis showed “that economic deprivation matters more for a child’s cognitive development and mother’s mental state for children’s behaviour and adjustment; but economic deprivation also engenders poorer maternal well-being, which in turn leads to a reduction in children’s positive behaviours.” (Kiernan and Huerta, 2008, p. 803).

Mezirow power and social action in “discourse”

The role of “discourse” is a central feature of transformation theory. Mezirow (1995) addressing a conference in Maynooth describes collaborative discourse:

Unlike ordinary everyday discussion or dialogue, collaborative discourse involves an exclusive focus on the content-deliberately weighing the evidence, assessing arguments or reasons advanced in support or opposition, examining alternative

viewpoints and on critically examining assumptions in order to reach a best judgement on the justification of a belief.

(Mezirow 1995)

He describes the preconditions of discourse as “freedom, equality, participatory democracy, tolerance, solidarity, caring, inclusiveness are social values implicit in the ideal process of making meaning through collaborative discourse.” Mezirow (1991, 1992, 1995) claims that his theory is an individualised and generic process comprising critical reflection, rational discourse and emancipatory praxis. Transformational, emancipatory learning is optimised within the ideal conditions of discourse, that is, communication free of distortion and manipulation. This liberal humanist approach is adopted in the delivery of the parenting programmes where the group leader is an empathetic facilitator with genuine non-judgemental concern for the parents attending the programme. “Adult and community education is much more than just a continuous development of skills; it embraces self-knowledge, covering both thoughts and feelings about who we are” (Connolly, 2007).

Newman (2012) claims that Mezirow’s preconditions for discourse are unattainable, “we are equally miserly about entering into solidarity with people” (p. 45) stating solidarity takes years to establish and suggests complete denial of one’s own self-interest and therefore it is highly unlikely that this type of commitment could be generated by a temporarily formed learning group. I agree with Newman in that Mezirow’s preconditions for discourse are idealistic and that they are possibly unattainable if left entirely to the role of the educator but there is a role for the learners to contribute to the process and bring “solidarity, care and tolerance” to the discourse. This form of collective participatory learning is central to community education processes. The power rests with the group, usually working in a group session with a facilitator who recognises their experiences as a base for learning, unlike the

formal setting where a teacher holds the power and learning focuses on the individual acquisition of knowledge (Aontas, 2004).

Other critics of Mezirow's theme of discourse debate the role of power in transformational learning (Hart 1990, Pietrykowski 1998, Mc Donald 1999). They argue that transformation theory does not adequately account for the power of systematic knowledge and cultural ideologies to distort communication and therefore constrain or inhibit adult learning:

There is a power relation involved in the formal education process. The power exercised by the adult educator may be repressive or constitutive but it is nevertheless a means to structure and regulate learner behaviour in accordance with a set of goals chosen by the educator.

(Pietrykowski, 1998, p. 2).

Mc Donald (1999) in her study of power in transformational learning conducted a case study of ethical vegans found that:

Power emerged as an integral force that shaped the transformational learning journey beyond the decision to adopt a new meaning perspective. To adopt a new meaning perspective, participants had to do more than make a decision. They had to live their new perspectives in the everyday world.

(Mc Donald, 1999, p. 6-7).

In her study power relations emerged at three interrelated levels; social cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal communicative distortions. A critical reading of their narratives however revealed the unconscious power of the normative ideology to regulate to conformity. Mc Donald (1999) "The ability of this ideology to unprehensively modify praxis of resistance presents evidence for the powerful and constraining effects of the dominant ideology on emancipatory education." (p. 13).

Transformative learning is an overarching explanatory theme of this study. Mezirow's vision of change at the level of the individual rather than the collective must be acknowledged and

addressed in the delivery of the parenting programmes of this study. Mezirow focuses inwardly on the liberation of the learner and he very much stands on the fence when it comes to organising collective actions. Freire in contrast has always argued that an unmasking of reality needs to be followed by critical intervention in order to transform it. For him, thought and action are indissoluble aspects of a single dialectical process (Tennant 2006). Mezirow asserts that individual perspective transformations must occur before social transformations can succeed. Action or praxis is, however a key component of his theory, although for him action can mean making a decision, being critically reflective or transforming a meaning structure as well as a change in behaviour. While perspective transformation may result in social action, Mezirow views the role of adult education is to promote and facilitate individual critical reflection in which “the only anticipated learning outcome... is a more rational and objective assessment of assumptions” (cited Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 336).

Engagement within wider social institutions

There is a sizeable body of research literature supporting the involvement of parents in educational settings and activities. Epstein (1995) sets the stage by defining parent involvement as families and communities who take an active role in creating a caring educational environment; her model of parental involvement emphasises the importance of a partnership between three interlocking spheres of influence, the family, the service setting and the community. Epstein’s (1995) framework for building parental partnerships highlights the importance of designing integrated social contexts, which fits with this study.

The social context: Parenting Programmes and Parental involvement in a DEIS community

In applying Mezirow’s transformative learning theory a parent who has developed a critical awareness of their capacity to influence their child’s education at home and in the school

should have the opportunity to take up their place in the “educational partnership” of the Education Act 1998. This educational partnership is defined as the relationship between parents, the school, the state and the church in supporting and planning for the best possible education for children both at home and at school. However, in Bleach’s (2010) evaluation of the national policy of parental involvement in their children’s education and schools, under this policy of “educational partnership” the finding stated “most participants had no knowledge of the partnership process at national level. Parents felt that they had very little influence either locally or nationally” (Bleach, 2010, p. 3).

Bourdieu (1997) attributes this lack of engagement by parents with the mainstream system to a lack of “cultural capital” (p. 47). Cultural capital, which is linked to economic capital (Bourdieu p. 49), is even more crucial in the decoding of schools, the interpretation of information and in the matching of child and school. He regards the parents as dependent on the professional expertise of teachers and the school. Reay (1998) as cited in Hornby and Lafacle (2011) suggests that it is the parents who possess cultural capital which matches that generally valued by school are in a position to take full advantage of the system. In contrast, working class parents, though possessing their own cultural capital, are aware of the difference between the cultural capital they possess and that of teachers. Reay (1998) concludes that, for working-class families, home-school relationships are about separateness, whereas for middle class families they are about interconnectedness, and that this difference shapes their respective attitudes to parental involvement.

This concept of home and school not necessarily forming a continuum is also evidenced in Radnor, Koshy, Taylor (2007) in their paper investigating policy implementation of an educational programme for “gifted and talented” pupils. The organisers of the programme reported a difficulty in identifying the “gifted and talented” pupils from working class

backgrounds. The authors attributed it to “the low dominant cultural capital of the children from a working- class background.” (p. 293).

Social groups may have what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as a “class habitus” which may influence educational choices and contribute towards a socio-cultural understanding of under-representation. The habitus is key to the reproduction of social relations. It is as much unconscious as it is conscious and is incorporated into a way of being, habits of mind and attitudes. It is the way that values and cultural capital are passed on. This is a useful way of looking how cultural norms shape the educational expectations and decisions of social groups and of how they contribute to patterns of participation or exclusion. Bleach (2010) in her research with parents highlights the need to possess cultural capital and secondly having the confidence and ability to deal with the system, being an effective advocate, being able to mediate between the child and the school and intervening when appropriate as key attributes to engaging with the education system. Being an advocate for your child at school is one of the most important roles a parent plays in the education system. The sense of “entitlement” (Vincent, 2001, p. 348) of disadvantaged parents was such that they assumed that they had neither the capacity nor the right to intervene in school matters and reacted with anger or resigned acceptance (Mc Namara Horvat et al, 2003, p.14) as cited in Bleach (2010). Parents felt constantly under pressure to demonstrate that they were “good” parents by caring for their children, valuing education and turning their children out clean and tidy. While middle class parents believe that they possess similar educational skills and prestige to the teachers use their cultural capital and social networks to contest the school’s official view of their child’s abilities (Mc Namara Horvat et al., 2003, p.14) cited in Bleach (2010).

Bleach’s (2010) research argued that it is not simply a question of being involved or uninvolved and categorised parents: Educator (under the constitution parents are considered to be the primary educators of their children), Consumer (school is just another service

provider), Welfare recipient (dependent on the professional expertise of the teachers and the school) and Supporter (actively support the school and may be very involved but they do not question or challenge the authority of the school).

Conclusion

The literature review indicates that there is an argument to place the delivery of parenting programmes within the context of a community education model. The literature review of the concept of transformative learning provides the rationale to investigate the educational experiences of the parents on the parenting programmes in terms of their individual narratives of that experience. Epstein's (1995) model of parental involvement fits with the Incredible Years Service locating it within the spheres of the personal, school and the community.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will explain the theoretical rationale for choosing a qualitative research methodology, present my research approach and introduce the research strategies used in the study. It will be seen that a social constructionist paradigm was applied, assuming a relative ontology (there are multiple realities). Qualitative research strategies were applied to inquire into community based parenting programmes focussing on gaining a rich, in-depth account of the nature of the experience of the participants using a narrative inquiry approach.

The main consideration for choosing a narrative inquiry approach is its potential to illuminate the experiences of the parents as participants on the parenting programme and their experiences of the collaborative model. Another factor for consideration is the relatively short time scale for fieldwork (approximately two months). Therefore, in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with five programme participants (all of whom had completed the programme during 2012), a parent group leader and a Home School Community Liaison Coordinator. One focus group was conducted with a group of six parents who were on week seven of a programme. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991) served as a theoretical framework within which the research questions were to be addressed. Field notes informed the content of themes addressed in the interview schedule, followed by a focus group to triangulate and validate the data provided in the in-depth interviews.

Theoretical paradigm/framework

Epistemology

Given that my research focuses on interactions between persons both within and across systems a social constructivist research paradigm as described by Creswell (2007) was applied. Creswell argues that the goal of the researcher is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied with the intent of making sense of (or interpreting) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning. Thus constructivism researchers often address the process of interactions among individuals. Social constructionism emerged from the work of Austrian-American and German sociologists Berger & Luckmann (1966) with the idea being that individuals construct meaning, and their shared realities through interacting with each other (Gergen and Gergen 1991). My approach is also influenced by Lynch's critique of research in education in which the participants, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas, become "subjects" as opposed to "partners" in the research process. Lynch (1999) argues:

The agenda for research and theory must be set in dialogue with people themselves. It cannot be set with reference to the interests of professional educationalists or sociologists alone. Is it not a form of abuse to use others people's oppression for one's own academic ends, when there is no return for those who are used?

(Lynch, 1999, p. 44).

Thus my epistemological stance is that of social constructivism as this study is intended to go towards an understanding of the experiences of the parents.

Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) provide a further insight into the position of the researcher working within a social constructionist paradigm "Constructionists believe that the researcher cannot maintain a detached or objective position, and they believe that both the

researcher and the subject should actively collaborate in the meaning-making process.” (p. 62). Etherington (2009) as cited in Savin-Baden & Howell Major (2013) contends that dialogue between researchers and participants is critical, describing this socially constructed knowledge as having the potential to be “transforming for participants and researchers.” (p. 63). Taking the position of social constructionism as my research paradigm this study draws upon a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) approach to conducting the study.

Ontology

In conducting this study I have been forced to consider my view of knowledge, in particular how knowledge may be uncovered. I am taking an inter-subjectivist position towards the study. The assumption is that reality is constructed by individuals and that the participants and the researcher will be actively involved in a learning process. A critical social theory lens could also be applied to my research in that there also exists the potential to interrogate the political, historical and socio-economic forces that influence the lives of the parents interviewed during the field work phase of the study. I have grappled with this theme of social injustice throughout the MEd. Programme. From the outset I was motivated to go towards an understanding of the experiences of parents who undertook the parenting programme combined with gaining insight to how we can commence dialogue between the community education and mainstream education sectors using the parenting programmes as a vehicle of investigation. All attempts were made to ensure that the study was conducted through the lens of a post-positivist social researcher “assuming a learning role rather than a testing one” (Fallon et al, 2005, p.18).

Narrative inquiry approach

The study focusses on the nature of the experience for the participants and this is the rationale for taking a narrative inquiry approach where “narrative approaches allow researchers to pursue the goal of studying the human experience.” (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p. 226). Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) book on narrative inquiry details their use of narrative research in studies of educational practice and experience. The view is asserted that human beings are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives. They construct a picture of what narrative researchers do and describe the process as:

A three dimensional space, in which narrative inquirers would find themselves, using a set of terms that pointed them backward and forward, inward and outward, and located them in place.

(Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

They believe that people’s lives are full of stories and that much dialogue is story related, so researchers in this area seek to tell stories of people’s lives and then to present them as narratives of experience. In this study I envisage the narrative approach as a useful way of gathering rich, in-depth qualitative data on the participant’s experience of participation on the parenting programmes.

Moen (2006) places narrative research within a framework of socio-cultural theory, where the challenge for the researcher is to examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur which also lends to my study of the contextual framework of the delivery of the parenting programmes. Similar to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Moen argues for the use of narratives in the field of teacher education. The narrative approach provides an opportunity to situate the perspective of the researcher and thus to encourage a more reflexive approach to the research findings. Clandinin & Connelly (2000)

conclude “In the end, the narrative combines views from the participants’ life with those of the researcher’s life in a collaborative narrative.” (p. 13). “Indeed reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery.” (England 1994: 244 cited Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013).

Profile of the population

The parenting programmes are delivered across six primary schools based in a suburban area of North Dublin which is designated as “disadvantaged” (Hasse & Pratschke, 2008). The programmes are delivered as part of an Incredible Years Home School Service with the overall aim of improving learning and well being outcomes for children and families in the area in accordance with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Theory (1979) which embeds the parent and the child within complex systems of multi-level, multi-directional influences that interact and thus affect the child and their immediate family system.

The six primary schools are categorised by the Department of Education and Skills as DEIS schools. The DEIS programme (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) was launched in 2005 and is intended to be an integrated approach to educational inclusion. Under the DEIS initiative the six schools have a Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator who collaborates with a local community education organisation to deliver the parenting programmes. My role is to co-ordinate the Incredible Years Service thus I work with both the schools, to deliver the Child and Teacher Incredible Years Programmes and with the community education organisation to deliver the parenting programmes. The service has been running since 2008 and over the years the delivery of the parenting programmes has increased from two programmes in 2008 to nine programmes in 2012. The parenting programme is available to all parents/primary carers of children aged 3-10 years, living in the area. The research population will be drawn from participants who completed the programme

in 2012 (seventy two parents) and from those on the programme at the time of the fieldwork (thirty six parents). Thus the size of the research population indicates a sampling approach. This combined with a narrative inquiry approach indicates a relatively small research sample group.

Overview of research participants

While the research strategy draws on the views of five parents I also wish that these views are given context thus, in order to help contextualise the perspectives of programme participants interviews were also carried out with a parent programme group leader and a Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator (HSCLC). As outlined by Bell (2005) “to provide multiple perspective of the context” (p. 23). Thus a qualitative research strategy that allows the voice of the parents, practitioners, providers and stakeholders to be heard contributing to the ideology of community education as a collective participative and collaborative model of learning was considered essential.

The parents were selected on the basis of having completed the twelve week parenting programme. Access to the research participants was negotiated in advance of the study therefore the main consideration was sample selection. There are two main schools of thought on how sampling should be done in qualitative research (Curtis et al., 2000): “theoretical sampling” and “purposeful sampling.” Creswell (2003) provides some direction for researchers when considering purposeful sampling. He explains “that idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question.” (p. 185). Creswell (2002) suggests that there are four goals for purposeful sampling:

Achieving representativeness of the context, capturing heterogeneity in the population, examining cases that are critical for the theories undergirding the study

and establishing comparisons to illuminate the reasons for difference between settings or individuals.

(Creswell, 2002, cited Savin- Baden & Howell Major 2013, p. 214).

As participant recall is important in a narrative inquiry only parents who had completed the twelve week programme during 2012 or those involved in the programme at the time of the fieldwork were considered eligible. The study sample was representative in terms of gender in so far as the majority of the sample was female but the perspective of a father was sought. The sample group ranged in age from mid-twenties to late thirties and the number of children varied from one child to six children in the family. As approximately one in ten programme participants are male, it was important to ensure that at least one of the parents interviewed was male. Potential participants were contacted directly and invited to take part in the study. I made contact with the interviewees face to face, by phone and by e mail and invited them to take part in my research study. The parent group leader interviewed had delivered parent programmes in school settings. The Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator (HSCLC) had collaborated with practitioners in the establishment of the programmes but had not been involved in direct delivery of programmes.

Ethical considerations

Prior to commencing the interview process ethical issues namely consent, privacy and confidentiality had be taken into consideration. A consent form based on the *Guidelines for drafting your Consent Form* (MEd Handbook 2012/2013) was given and explained to each of the interviewees in person and was signed and dated prior to the commencement of the interview. Procedures such as recording the interview, reviewing of the transcripts and the right to withdraw at any stage were discussed with interviewees. As all of the interviewees were already known to the researcher (in my role Incredible Years Co-ordinator) the lead in time needed was considerably reduced and a level of trust and familiarity already existed. I

ensured that the parents selected had not been participants in any group where I had taken on the role of parenting programme group leader. The main ethical consideration was how the researcher situated (myself) in relation to the participants. Doing so requires an awareness of power relationships during interviews. Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) draw attention to this situation describing it:

The unique context of the researcher and the researched, and should lead to the researcher striving for a clear view of what participants mean while simultaneously seeking and acknowledging co-created meaning. We also may engage in self-disclosure, which involves the researcher in disclosing their positionality with participants, as well as voicing mistakes.

(Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p. 335).

This dilemma for a researcher in this role is discussed in an article written by Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) where they question “Should qualitative researchers be members of the population they are studying, or not?” (p. 54). My situation is that I am known to the interviewees having a role in the delivery of the Incredible Years Service. Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle (2009) elaborate the benefits of being a member of the group one is studying is acceptance and automatically provides a level of trust and openness in participants, while a drawback is also possible in that “the researcher’s perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experience and that as a member of the group he or she will have difficulty separating it from the that of the participants.” (p. 58).

Feminist researchers, such as Oakley (2000) advocate for a participatory model of a non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationship which has the potential to over-come the separation between the researcher and the researched. Etherington (2007) purposes “to conduct ethical research within reflexive relationships” seeing stories as relational where “we might silently fill in the gaps with our assumptions and beliefs” (p. 600). Etherington uses reflexivity as a tool whereby we can include ourselves at any stage:

Reflexive research encourages us to display in our writing/conversations the interaction between ourselves and our participants from our first point of contact until we end those relationships, so that our work can be understood, not only in terms of *what* we have discovered, but *how* we have discovered it.

(Etherington, 2007, p. 601).

Thus, while conducting the interviews with the parents of my sample I endeavoured to be sensitive to the rights, beliefs and cultural contexts of the participants, as well as their position within patriarchal or hierarchical power relations, in society and in our research relationship.

Privacy and confidentiality

The one-to-one interviews were conducted in a meeting room in the office of the Incredible Years Service. This space was booked in advance to ensure privacy. The parents interviewed were assigned fictitious names. This approach was also applied to any persons/children or schools named during the interviews. The focus group was conducted with the six parents on completion of a group session and we agreed a letter would denote names (Deirdre-D) documented in the transcripts. The parent group leaders were not present during the focus group session. One soft copy of the transcripts is stored in a secure filing cabinet in the Incredible Years Service office. All files have been deleted from the digital recorder and from the laptop.

Research strategies

Creswell (2007) explains that the choice of methods depends on whether the intent is to specify the type of information to be collected in advance of the study or to allow it to emerge from participants during the study. The social constructivist takes the view that knowledge is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks Merriam & Cafarella (1999). Taking this model of an emergence of knowledge through

engaging socially in conversation as a defining characteristic of my qualitative study I intend to use a narrative inquiry design with methods which include semi-structured interviews, a focus group and maintaining a research diary to record emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data.

Semi-structured interviews

I found that in using a semi-structured interview, the researcher not only follows some preset question but also includes additional questions in response to participant comments and reactions. This flexibility created a sense of the interviews as a conversation on the topic and kept the conversation flowing and is in keeping with a narrative form of inquiry. Furthermore, recording the interview gave me the opportunity to listen to the interviewee and to remember comments and to use these comments to introduce questions “as it is only possible to ask good follow-up questions if participants’ comments have been heard and understood.” Savin-Baden & Howell Major (2013, p. 361). I found this helpful in creating a personal and very real connection with the participants. Bryman (2012) has several recommendations for preparing for interviews:

- Be familiar with the setting
- Make sure the equipment is ready and functioning
- Make sure the setting is quiet

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five parents; four females and one male. There was a variation in ages ranging from mid-twenties to late thirties and in family make-up. Two of the parents were with their original partners, one was in a second relationship and two of the parents were parenting alone. There was some variation in economic circumstance with three of the parents dependent on social welfare, one in employment and one in full time education. All of the participants had children aged 5-10 years at the time they participated on the parenting programme with family size varying between one child and six children. The

interviews were transcribed verbatim and copies of the transcripts were given to each interviewee for final approval.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a parenting programme group leader (who had delivered programmes based in local primary schools) and with a Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator who had collaborated with practitioners in the establishment of programmes but had not been involved in the direct delivery of programmes.

Focus Group Interviews

On completion of the semi-structured interviews, which were the primary source of data collection, I interviewed a group of parents currently participating on a parenting programme. The focus group interviews provided data triangulation which was used as a strategy to “enhance the rigour of the research” (Robson, 2002, p.174). Savin- Baden & Howell Major (2013) describe focus groups as “a gathering of a limited number of individuals, who through conversation with each other provide information about a specific topic, issue or subject.” (p. 375).

The topic for discussion was their experience of participating on the programme and comprised six parents; five females and one male. I had met the group the previous week to explain my study and to invite volunteers to meet me at the end of the session the following week when I planned to facilitate the focus group interviews. This proved particularly helpful as the participants were clear as to the purpose and procedure, so while the duration of the session was quite short there was a “chaining” or “cascading” effect; talk links to, or tumbles out of, the topic and expressions preceding it.” (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, p. 182). A similar procedure regarding recording, transcribing conversations verbatim, completion of consent forms and a copy of the transcript was given to each parent for approval.

Analysis of data

The interviews were transcribed verbatim in an attempt to capture the participants tone, pacing and timing which I regard as important elements for data interpretation. Meaning, for many qualitative researchers, resides not only in what a participant says but also the way in which it is said (Bailey 2008; Heritage et al. 2006). The transcripts were read and I reminded myself of my research question: *In what way do parenting programmes, delivered within the realms of a home/school/community model build relationships between parents and mainstream education?* The transcripts were reread identifying key words in the transcripts. Researchers normally repeat this process with all their relevant data, with similar segments of data being marked with the same label. This process is called coding (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). These codes were then categorised into themes and are presented under reflections on participation on the parent programme, learning from the programme and relationship with the school.

Conclusion

The intention was that the research would uncover parents' experiences, thoughts and feelings as participants of a community based parenting programme and that it would contribute to the broader debate of home/school/community partnership models of education. The narrative inquiry approach proved to be a useful way of encouraging the parents to tell their stories and reveal themselves as active agents within the learning process of the parenting programme. The next chapter presents the findings of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Well, just that I really recommend parents to do the Incredible Years, because the techniques that you learn and the advice that they give is unbelievable and it has really changed my life. And it has changed the way I praise my kids, and the way I deal with my kids, overall it has just given me a happier home, it really has.

(Ellie, in depth interview).

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews with programme participants, staff and the focus group currently engaged in the parenting programme. It provides deeper insights into the nature of parent education outcomes as evidenced through the experiences of participants in the Incredible Years parenting programme. The purpose of the interviews and the focus group was to examine parents' experience of participation and learning having completed the twelve week parenting programme and to explore their relationship with mainstream education on completion of the programme. The programme is run in local schools and consists weekly two hour sessions co-facilitated by two Incredible Years trained group leaders from a local community education organisation. It is run in the mornings and is free of charge and refreshments are provided. Financial reimbursement for childcare is provided, however the majority of parents attending have school age children.

The Literature Review informed the broad areas addressed during the data collection stage. Therefore the questions were structured under three broad headings: **Reflections on participating on the Incredible Years Parenting Programme:** in order to assess the delivery process within a community education context. **Learning from the programme:** to assess whether Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory can be applied to the

learning process of the parenting programmes. **Relationship with the school:** to determine the extent to which parents feel part of “the education partnership” discussed in chapter two. There was scope for findings to emerge beyond these broad areas as the methodology was that of a social constructivist with a primary research strategy of one-to-one interviews.

Five parents, a parent group leader and a Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator were interviewed. The questions and the approach used was to encourage the participants to talk about (tell the story) of their experience of the parenting programme. In keeping with the narrative inquiry approach of this study I will begin by introducing the parents and their reasons for taking up a place on the programme. The parent group leader, the Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator and the focus group parents will also be introduced. The intent is to give an understanding of their circumstances. In order to preserve anonymity the names are fictitious. The five parents had heard about the programme from other parents and/or through the school. The key motivation to take up a place on the programme was because of the positive comments they had heard from previous programme participants: “it sounded great” remarked one parent.

Participants: The parents

Ellie is in her late thirties and she has three children, two older boys and a daughter Nicky who was five when her mother was on the parenting programme. Ellie is a full time mother and described her experience of parenting when coming onto the programme: “Nicky was beginning to be a nightmare” and she felt she wanted “to go and try to learn”.

Leanne is in her early thirties and has two children, an older boy who is fifteen and her daughter Tina who was five when her mother was on the parenting programme. Leanne is in a second relationship and four young adult step-children live with her and her partner. Leanne described coming onto the programme “I wasn’t an authority figure” and felt her daughter’s

“cheeky” behaviour was attributed to the dynamic in the home, where “everybody was telling her what to do at the same time.”

Jean is in her late thirties and is parenting alone. She has one daughter Ciara who was ten when her mother was on the programme. Jean is a student and provides assistance in the Junior Infant class where her daughter attends school. Jean explained that as a single parent “you do always wonder are you doing an ok job” and while she was not experiencing any conflict with her child she felt unsure in her parenting role.

Samantha is in her early twenties and is a full time mother to two small children, a three year old boy and a six year old girl Kayla. Samantha is an only child and she wanted to learn how “to connect with your kids without fighting.” She described her experience of parenting as a feeling “of going off my rocker” and felt she had a negative relationship particularly with Kayla.

Bob is in his mid/late thirties and possibly is parenting alone (he was not explicit regarding his family circumstance). Bob has a son Mark who was nine when his father was on the parenting programme. Bob works as a chef and described his experience of parenting as “losing the head” with Mark and his non-compliant attitude.

The providers

Sarah is an accredited Incredible Years parent group leader working fulltime in a local community education organisation and is a part-time student on a degree programme at a local university. Sarah is in her early forties and has been co-facilitating parenting programmes since 2010. She lives in the local community and has two teenage daughters.

Teresa is a Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator in two local primary schools. She is in her late forties has extensive experience in mainstream primary education, as a

classroom and learning support teacher. She has been in her current role for many years. Teresa is a member of a local HSCL cluster group and has been actively supporting the provision of the parenting programmes since 2008.

The focus group

Six parents from a current parenting programme took part in the focus group. They were on week seven so were mid-way through the programme. The group comprised five females and one male. The age profile spanned early twenties to late forties and two of the mothers are foster parents. The parents in this group talked about experiences “sometimes you can feel on your own when you’re meeting the parents outside the school.” They felt supported while on the programme “I actually really love coming to the group every week” commented one mother.

Reflections on participation on the programme

A safe place

Sarah the parent group leader and Teresa, the HSCL Co-ordinator described the delivery of the programmes in terms of: a non-judgemental approach, working collaboratively on a basis of equality, being mindful of issues such as confidentiality and respect, having a comfortable setting, and as the HSCL Co-ordinator described it “a human approach”. While the parents are not necessarily familiar with these terms, the conversation with them unveiled their feelings of being in a safe, non-judgemental space:

I actually really love coming to the group every week I think that it’s become...you’re not afraid to share when you come to the group it’s a really safe place the people are lovely and it’s good to know that you’re not alone because I was feeling really guilty and I was thinking 'What am I doing wrong?'

(Parent in the focus group)

Other parents talked about being comfortable about sharing with many directly naming “confidentiality”. While they didn’t use the term collaborative the parents commented how the group leaders opened up discussion asking “has anyone else any ideas, or going through that.” Samantha commented: “It’s good to hear other people the way they go on as well you know I have no sisters or brothers to sort bounce off, you know.”

Connecting with other parents

All the parents recalled that it was a positive way of meeting other parents for both socialising and sharing parenting skills “meeting other parents just talking with them” “everybody was nice” were comments that emerged frequently during the interviews. Jean, who was looking for reassurance regarding her parenting remarked “it wasn’t long into the programme where we all started sharing things and being very open and honest with each other.” Parents commented that it was a “lovely opportunity to get to know people.” This view was further reinforced by the HSCL Co-ordinator who explained that while she hasn’t spoken to parents in detail regarding the content of the programme she described being in conversation with parents who did the programme and reflected “one of the things I have noted is that people find being a member of the group itself a very strong experience.” She particularly remembered one parent telling her that “you learn so much from being part of the group” and that you “build up a bond of trust.” The HSCL Co-ordinator emphasised the “huge learning from within the group as well as the programme itself.”

Group leaders

When the parents were asked about their thoughts overall on the programme, the five parents and the parents in the focus group immediately identified the role of the group leaders as integral to the positive experience of participating on the programme and to creating a safe place facilitating connections between group members. Ellie, reflecting on her first day going

to the group: “Well I have to say when I first went in I was really nervous the first morning because I didn’t know what to expect. But the two leaders that we had, Sarah and Lisa, were brilliant.” Others referred to this early introduction to the group as the leaders giving them a sense of “security”

Well you kind of think of them as parents because they're so on the same wave length as us; do you know what I mean? I think I group them in when we are talking about them because of the whole group because it is the really safe place to say how we feel.

(Parent in focus group)

Similar views were voiced by the HSCL Co-ordinator “I have heard other people give very good feedback about it that the people who run the programme are very approachable.”

The parent group leader talked about developing her relationship with the group and being aware of individual needs within the group “it’s maybe their first time maybe out in a group so we would really like to encourage that and keep that going.” She explained that each group develops its own “contract” outlining how they are going to work as a group and that this is revisited at the beginning of group sessions. Sessions include group warm-up exercises, informal coffee breaks and she emphasised that the group leaders work on a collaborative basis with the group.

Learning from the programme

The learning is presented under *New perspectives*: Learning new ways of looking at things, strategies they can teach their children. *Relationship with child*: A new connection with their children, spending more positive time with children, effective communication and strengthening parent-child bond. *Parental confidence*: Confidence in self, feeling of being affirmed as being a good parent.

New perspectives

Parents spoke about the content of the programme and highlighted the techniques, tips and strategies they had learned on the programme. They described it as “practical” and talked about the learning methodologies: group discussion, role play, analysing the videos, home activities, use of stickers and the supplementary materials; folders, a book and handouts. When questioned they all expressed a high level of satisfaction with the methodologies and with the materials. The main criticisms of the methodologies were directed at the “videos”. Leanne jokingly commented “Now the videos they show are a bit far out, with the 70s and all but eh, there’s a couple of them, you’re just laughing too much at them to listen to what’s going on in it.” This sentiment was shared by four of the five parents interviewed. They all agreed that it was more the aesthetics of the videos rather than the message, as Jean summarised her view “but they are very to the point and we’d talk about them and discuss what if.” When questioned Sarah, the parent group leader, explained that the intention of including these dated materials is in keeping with adherence to the programme protocols and that they are a teaching tool, she commented “the videos while dated are used as a trigger for discussion.”

A book (*The Incredible Years, A trouble shooting guide for parents of children aged 2-8 years*) is given to parents as part of the programme and views on the relevance of it were mixed in that the father really liked the book while Leanne commented “Well to be honest with you I never really read.” She went on to explain “I just read the sheets that they gave us out every week, the pointers and the homework that was very helpful.” Bob explained:

I liked the homework it was like being back in school I was a great student! It kept your mind focussed on what you needed to do as well so there was a bit of responsibility on you to do it and report back at the next session it was taking me out of myself as well like I had to do that bit of work whereas if I was just reading I'd be thinking ah I'm bored, so it gave me something to do - I'd sit down and do my homework.
(Bob)

The most striking themes emerging from the questions focussing on the learning for the parents were their reflections on how they had changed their thinking and patterns of behaviour as a result of the techniques, tips and strategies they learned on the programme and that they had tried to teach some of these to their children. I will discuss the three main techniques/strategies that were common across all the interviews including the session with the focus group: positive praise, ignore technique, and the calm down strategy.

Listening to the conversations with the parents and their views on how the programme helped them develop new ways of looking at things. The five parents talked about using “positive praise” and saying to their children “I’m proud of him” and “naming what I am proud of him for.” The parents talked about the “penny dropping moment” when instead of “picking out the things they were doing wrong” I started “praising them for trying to do things” remarked Leanne.

Ignoring minor misbehaviour was another technique that parents talked about changing their way of looking at a situation. Parents who had more than one child found this technique very effective and it gave them a new way of behaving in a challenging moment in the home:

Yes, I just find that instead of spending so much time with Ricky when he is having a bad day it's to ignore the minor stuff and to get on and praise the others get on with doing stuff with the other kids whereas before all the attention was on him and the other kids were left out and they were seeing the whole big drama going on so it has switched around now I just leave him until he is ready to come to me and just spend time with the other children so it has sort of worked for the whole family rather than just thinking it's not just about Ricky all the time I have learned it for benefitting the other kids.

(Parent Focus Group)

Parents talked about being able to handle situations better and being “calmer” and the “house is calmer” again for some parents this was linked to the ignore technique:

Yeah the ignore techniques, you know how sometimes children are whining, it's easy for it to escalate when you say stop this I don't want to hear this. I think that was one of the best things I learned where I would think before I would speak it definitely

made me better at that, where I'd say ok if I ignore this it will stop and it did! I found it worked.

(Jean Lone Parent)

Bob mentioned using “count to ten” that he used in his job as a chef “walk away and start again and now I use that at home too.”

Parents felt comfortable and confident in their insights and talked about being able to “model the appropriate behaviour” for their children and about being able to diffuse situations at home “I was kind of able to get her mind off the play station, and then she helped me in the kitchen” recalled Ellie. Ellie went on to describe prior to taking part in the programme she would have been shouting “will you just stop, leave me alone.”

Relationship with child

During my initial interview with the parent group leader she explained that while there are lots of themes and topics within the programme, the starting point always focusses on working with the parents to build a relationship or change the nature of their interaction with their child. She explained that the parents often want to get straight into addressing discipline issues but by introducing “special time” at home the parents experience real success very early into the programme:

At the start so we go back to basics with special time, so a lot of time parents spend all their time with their kids, but to actually allocate ten minutes a day and really focus on letting the child take the lead, so letting them make decisions about what games to play.....

(Sarah, parent group leader)

This emphasis on the importance of “special time” is central to the ideology upon which the parenting programme is based. Parents and children spending special time together are building a positive bond that is not based on whether or not they are successful in school or

soccer or music. The purpose of this program is to help parents understand the value of parental attention and child-centred special time and how it contributes to children becoming creative, self-confident individuals who have strong attachments to their families (Webster-Stratton, 1992, 2002, 2007).

Sarah elaborated on the experience of parents picking up their children from school and asking them how they got on that day and being met with a sigh “nothing” and that how the use of “special time” is a “great way of finding out what’s going on with the kids without putting pressure on them.” This concept of special time is continued right throughout the twelve week programme. She described the ideology of the programme “it is kind of raising awareness to parents.”

In my conversations with the five parents this concept of special time was a recurrent theme and each parent described what they did with their child during special time. Ellie, who has two older boys and a daughter who is now six years old described it “this special time ... hmmm it showed me how to really enjoy them, because I wasn’t enjoying them at that stage, because they were just too out of control. But I got them back in.”

Jean, who decided to participate on the programme because as a lone parent “Well I suppose I am a single parent and touch wood no problems so far. Ciara is a happy settled child but you do always wonder are you doing an ok job.” While Jean wasn’t experiencing conflict in her relationship with her daughter, the concept of doing “special time” with her child was raising awareness for her; it was more than just being with her child:

I made a conscious effort to focus on special time like going to the park whereas as before I'd be doing the dinner tidying up and then watch TV so during special I'd let Ciara pick within reason she was able to pick what we'd do and she loved it and even after I had finished the course she'd say we're not going to stop this now and I agreed absolutely not.

(Jean Lone parent)

The other four parents interviewed were experiencing more challenges and conflict in their relationships with their children prior to participation on the programme. Samantha explained “Yeah, well I wanted to stop saying no all the time and arguing with the kids all the time because you don’t think about it but you don’t realise how many times you say “no”.. I was always fighting with Kayla.” Samantha felt that for her the programme helped her “connect with” her children in “a positive way”. She talked about bedtime in her home as “I used to be stressed out of my mind” she talked of the use of positive praise and using this as a way of communicating with her children and described the programme as “no not to deal with” rather how to “connect with your kids.” This view was reiterated by a father in the focus group “for me personally the aim of the course isn’t just about how to deal with your child’s behaviour it’s more about encouraging a positive environment for you and your child.”

Bob talked about special time as a “bonding time between us” and described it as a time when there was “no arguing, no fighting, no screaming” and explained “I enjoy it as well because the two of us both participate in it.”

Parental confidence

During the initial ten minutes of my conversation with Sarah, the parent group leader, we explored the “model” of the programme in that it is a manualised programme that has been proven to be effective when delivered in its sequenced format or as the programme developer directs the deliverer “ensuring fidelity to the model.” From her perspective she didn’t regard this as inhibiting the potential for personal development and stressed that “the programme plays a key role in building the confidence of the parents.. It builds their confidence in the decisions that they make as well.”

During the interviews when parents talked about deciding to do the programme they expressed their negative feelings about themselves as parents. “Nicky was beginning to be a

nightmare.. So I said I have to go and try and learn...” commented Ellie. Leanne described her situation “I wasn’t an authority figure, like it was more too many chiefs and not enough Indians.” Bob spoke about “losing the head” with his son, Mark, when he wouldn’t respond to basic requests in the home. These negative feelings and views of themselves as parents were also raised during the focus group “I feel kind of guilty about how I interact, you know when he is bold” commented the father in the focus group. This doubting of the self as a parent was also raised by the Teresa the HSCL Co-ordinator, in her experience of working with parents, she talked about confidence and parents often being caught in “self-judgement” and attributed this as a key barrier for parents in taking up opportunities:

It's hard to speculate the reasons why some people take something up and others don't you never know and everyone is different but barriers might be I seem to be dwelling on the confidence a bit (pause) - what else might stop you- a little bit of fear maybe, fear of the unknown, fear that your parenting style isn't great or that you don't have confidence in it orself-judgement.

(Teresa, HSCLC)

When questioned from her perspective as a group leader as to what were the key things that parents get from taking part in the parent programme Sarah stated parents have told her “I feel more confident in the decisions I make” she expanded that “parents notice the change in themselves” and that they felt positive about the change. She explained that the underlying philosophy of the programme is based on a model that recognises that the parents are coming into the programme with skills, strategies and techniques learned through their experience of parenting:

A lot of them do the stuff anyway it’s just maybe putting a name on it and showing them that maybe doing things a little bit differently so I think we have a lot of penny dropping moments for parents.

(Sarah, Parent Group Leader)

She explained “for some parents it can be reinforcement that they are doing a really good job because parents second guess themselves all the time.”

In conversation with the five parents they each expressed an increase in self confidence or self awareness and were much more positive in their views of themselves as parents. This sense of confidence was varied across the conversations particularly the way in which the father articulated his personal journey. Bob raised the issue of personal confidence more in terms of a competence “Well it improved my parenting skills by doing the course I don’t lose the head as much as I used to because of it I can control it do you know what I mean” He continued to describe his situation as “everything is grand now.”

Ellie spoke of her reluctance to take part in the role plays “I’m not one to stand up in a crowd and talk, so the role play thing I kind of just took a back seat but enjoyed watching the others doing it and had a laugh with them.” She went on to describe how one of the group leaders waited for her to take an opportunity. Ellie revealed “But I got the confidence one day and I did a role play with Sarah.” She talked about how doing the role play helped her in her parenting:

I’m not saying like there’s no perfect parents but I was always strict on the kids. But it showed me how to relax a little with them and enjoy them.

(Ellie)

Other qualitative (Furlong and Mc Gilloway, 2011) and quantitative research (Gardner et al., 2010) has also found that an increase in positive parenting skills, rather than a reduction in critical parenting, is an important mechanism of change.

Leanne talked about how the programme gave her the confidence to deal with the difficulties of having older step children. She viewed herself as “I’m more of a person that wants to be people’s friend rather than arguing but I’m not one since I did the course I’m saying this is things we need to do with Tina”. She described how she “has been getting them on board with me showing them...”she talked about how participation on the programme and the “little

one, two three steps that you learn in it it's not only for kids I think you can use it with anybody so that's why I found it very good".

A mother from the focus group described herself as "I can have the proud face I am the mom in the yard with the smile." Other parents in this group commented "I have gone easy on myself a bit." The Dad in this group stated "the main thing that has really changed is me saying I'm proud of him." Parents talked about feeling re-assured in their existing skills and about having the "confidence not to be afraid to follow through." (Mother in focus group).

The HSCL Co-ordinator spoke of the importance of the end of programme celebration as contributing to that affirmation of parents in their roles:

Anyone who finishes a twelve week programme deserves to celebrate and IY acknowledges that and does it in style and I really like that because I suppose one thing that strikes me about the programme is but generally speaking like other things in life they seems to attract about 90 per cent female population I don't know where all the dads are maybe it's just not a format that works for men so readily but I think these women these mothers they do an incredible task. Parenting is huge it is probably the greatest challenge that you could be faced with in this life and anyone who is willing to learn more about it deserves to be celebrated and congratulated so I think that's a really enriching part of the programme.

(Teresa, HSCLC)

Another source of confidence included the sense of competence and control which parents experienced in being able to effect positive behavioural changes in their children as the dad, Bob described it "I learned about laying down the law without it being too much over the top it's kind of getting a balance." Similar to other qualitative research (Patterson et al. 2005) parents also emphasised increased personal confidence as being important in removing guilt and isolation and instilling self-efficacy beliefs as one mother in the focus group stated "I suppose the course has made me go easier on myself."

Relationship with the school

While participating on the programme the five parents had linked with their child's class teacher and had shared techniques such as the use of positive praise. This was true also of the parents in the focus group –all six parents had informed their child's teacher that they were participating on the programme and were working with the teacher on shared strategies to promote the social and emotional development of the child. The parents all talked about being on first names terms with their child's class teacher and talked very positively about their child's school. One mother in the focus group described the relationship with the class teacher “we do work together so we take on each other's ideas and strategies so yeah we do work in conjunction with each other.” This finding concurs with the literature and the developer of the programme who advocates that an added advantage of offering parent interventions in schools is that collaboration between the teachers and the parents can be promoted more easily (than in clinic settings) and offer a greater chance of increasing consistency of approaches for children across settings (from home to school and vice versa) leading to the possibility of sustained effects (Webster-Stratton et al., 2010). Furthermore, the five parents had been or still were volunteering in classroom activities such as maths for fun, vocabulary games and paired reading sessions.

Sarah, the parent group leader stated “I think the fact that it is linked with the schools is really, really important and the fact that the schools and the parent programme complement each other.” Teresa (HSCLC) also shared this opinion and explained that what draws the parents into the school initially is “helping their own child” and that when they have done that and they have become more comfortable the next step might be doing something for themselves such as a parenting programme. She commented “it's not significant who is

offering the programme it is whether it is relevant.” She reiterated the view of the parent group leader:

I think that the Home School Community Liaison scheme works very well with the work of Incredible Years because they probably complement each other quite well so it has worked out very well over the last number of years. It has been a very harmonious kind of a relationship, I think.

(Teresa, HSCL Co-ordinator)

Continuing learning

Finally another finding was that the parents were continuing learning for themselves. Samantha described her experience of learning in the group as “having time to digest it” she talked enthusiastically “if something teaches me to be a better parent I will jump at it feet first.” The four women interviewed all expressed a plan to continue their learning while Bob said “I have to say I’d really really recommend it for everybody to do it cos it’s a brilliant course.” He didn’t express any future thoughts/plans. In comparison the four women talked about “enjoying getting out and meeting different people”. Three of the women are currently doing local community education courses and the other mother, Jean, is completing a post-graduate course. As the parents in the focus group will complete the parent programme in June I didn’t inquire as to their future plans.

Reciprocity

A finding, which I had not considered as I had been focussed on the parent/school relationship, was the positive, dynamic relationship that developed as a result of collaboration between the providers. The community education organisation and the school personnel agreed that collaborating on the provision of the parenting programme was a positive way of building relationships that had not previously existed between community education and the mainstream sector. Both saw it as a reciprocal relationship sharing resources and expertise. This challenges views regarding community education being provided outside “the

framework of educational institutions” (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003, p. 71). The findings highlight the opportunity local primary schools can offer in terms of warm, comfortable spaces where parents feel welcomed for community education groups to flourish.

Summary of findings

This chapter’s opening quote from Ellie summarises much of the research findings. The parents’ reflections on their participation on the programme reveal it to have been a safe place to connect with other parents and they felt comfortable in the non-judgemental group process approach of the group leaders. The learning, as Ellie described it “has really changed my life” and has given parents new perspectives. They all expressed a new confidence in themselves and felt that they had “happier homes.” The parents expressed confidence and competence in talking to class teachers and the five parents interviewed enjoyed the social aspect of the programme. For some it enabled them to continue to be involved in learning groups. The next chapter provides an analysis of the research findings draws a conclusion to the study and presents the insights I have gained through the process of conducting this research study.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this final chapter is to tie together the aspects of the research project. It provides a rationale for the findings and connects the findings to the theory and the literature; and it makes recommendations for practice and policy (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). The study set out to build a narrative of parents' experience of participation on the parenting programme and to investigate any resulting changes in parental involvement in mainstream education. It sought to address my research question: *In what way do parenting programmes delivered within the realms of a home/school/community model build relationships between parents and mainstream education?*

Drawing from the literature and the findings of the research Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory can be applied to the learning experienced by the parents. As narrated by the parents the experience was an immensely positive one. The five parents talked about major changes in their lives and they gave credit to the parenting programme. The themes which emerged suggest something else other than parents just learning technical or behavioural skills. The learning extends beyond acquisition of skills and suggests the parents educational experience was more transformative in that the parents began to look at things/situations in fundamentally new and different ways and to take actions to change their lives in essential ways. These changes fit into the concept of transformative learning; Ellie's articulating the use of special time causing a shift from feeling her children were out of control to learning "how to enjoy them" can be compared to the shift in "meaning perspectives" of Mezirow's transformative theory of learning.

The next section provides a thematic analysis of the findings as they emerged in the conversations with the parents. Thematic analysis can be a method which both works to reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface of “reality” (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Reflections on participation on the programme

A sense of “connectivity” and “solidarity” was strongly evident in my conversations with the parents, programme provider and with the school who hosted the programme. The group process during the parenting programme sessions was recalled as a form of collective participation as parents spoke of the openness of everyone to help and understand each other. This feeling of solidarity is a precondition in Mezirow’s “discourse” which supports my argument that the learners working in partnership with educators contribute to the discourse of transformative learning. This partnership approach to learning is advocated within the community education sector, Connolly’s (2003) review of community education groups refers to them as holding “non-hierarchical, autonomous, participatory and empowerment goals and structures” (p. 196).

Parents felt participating on the programme was a great way of getting to know other parents. The sessions included opportunities for informal conversations with each other, with the group leaders and with school staff who sometimes dropped in during the tea break. This compares favourably with the literature regarding the impact of school/community links generating more positive attitudes amongst adults and schools (Dyson and Robinson, 1999). It also fits with Webster-Stratton’s “multi environment approach” which includes the parenting programmes in an environment where the parents and teachers work in partnership (Webster-Stratton and Reid, 2010). Participation in learning tends to enhance social capital, by helping develop social competencies, extending social network, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others (Field, 2011).

The Group process where parents felt safe to talk contributed to the positive recall of their experience of being on the programme. The group leaders were described as “helpful”, “approachable” and “on the same wavelength.” This description fits with a feminist critique of community education that embodies “a blurring of distinction between the *teacher* and the *taught*” (DES, 2000, p. 111).

Learning from the programme

New perspectives

Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory discusses the desirability of structuring adult education programmes in ways to help students reassess personal assumptions. As learners examine the assumptions they must critically examine whether present thought patterns are right for them. Mezirow challenges educators to provide opportunities to transform personal perspectives so that learners do not unreflectively rely on hidden assumptions when making important decisions such as those associated with parenting. Parents talked about how they had changed their thinking and patterns of behaviour as a result of the techniques, tips and strategies they had learned on the programme. There was a shared sentiment across the one to one interviews and the focus group of parenting practices being less punitive and parents feeling that they needed to control situations to a shift in thinking about their lives as a family in a shared and happy space where they enjoyed their children and engaged in conversation with them. The parents in thinking critically about their situations began to look at new ways of interacting with their children shifting from a reactive to a proactive perspective.

Relationship with child

The five parents all spoke about a feeling of having built a more nurturing relationship with their children and articulated this more as a change in themselves than to a change in their children. Their view of the child-parent relationship had positively changed and they attributed it to the strategies such as positive praise and special time that they had learned about and practised during the group sessions. A fundamental insight for them was to learn to focus on their child's positive behaviour (achieved through special time, play and praise) rather than constantly trying to eliminate their child's negative behaviour. One mother, Samantha described the programme as "not how to deal with" rather she learned "how to connect with the kids." All five parents put the technique "special time" in place in their homes. This adoption of a new meaning perspective was more than just a decision, which Mezirow contends; they had to live their new meaning perspective in their daily interaction with their children. Thus, transformational learning emerges as an ongoing, dynamic journey of learning (Mc Donald, 1999).

Parental confidence

All parents felt that participation in the programme had increased their confidence and well-being as stated by the parent group leader "parents notice the change in themselves" and that they felt positive about the change. Confidence emerged due to the group process where the non-judgemental approach of the group leaders affirmed them as being good parents. For parents to take up a place on the programme to do so is not taken lightly and for some it was a very emotional experience, in particular when talking about their conflicts with their children. Lynch and Lodge (2002) while researching the existence of equality and power in schools cite that much education theory and sociological research gives little or no attention to the "affective aspects of the learning environment." (p. 11). They continue "the denial of

the emotional dimensions of the learning process means a denial of the totality of what it is to be a teacher and a learner in the first instance.” (Lynch and Lodge, 2002, p. 11). Adult education is most effective when it encompasses the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of learning.

Transformative theory is about learning and problem solving, it is about creating a critical awareness of our existence without feeling controlled by it. Transformative learning involves the motivation to learn by transforming our frames of reference; our perception of the world “meaning perspectives” that is changing our assumptions through critical reflection. The task of the educator then is to promote critical learning through dialogue and reflection. This in turn provides an opportunity for the educator to facilitate change and parenting education provides such an opportunity. The challenge for providers of parenting programmes is to consider how the role of facilitator as educator fits with the existing personal or organisational values and the opportunities, risks and ethical issues presented in the process.

Relationship with the school (mainstream education)

The findings suggest that the parent programme is more a piece in a range of learning and participation experiences and what is fundamentally more important is the fact that the providers (community education and mainstream education) work together to deliver the service. Sarah, the parent group leader stated “I think the fact that it is linked with the schools is really, really important and the fact that the schools and the parent programme complement each other.” Teresa (HSCLC) also shared this opinion and explained that what draws the parents into the school initially is “helping their own child” and that when they have done that and they have become more comfortable the next step might be doing something for themselves such as a parenting programme.

The parenting programmes are delivered within the realms of a home/school/community model, and therefore I had expected the parents to express new and more confident relationships with their children's school. However, when questioned the five parents felt very happy and confident in their relationship with the school and did not directly attribute it to participation on the parenting programme.

However, their experience had contributed positively to parents' views of their own potential as having a role in their child's education and on their confidence to continue their own education. The five parents interviewed were all very clear that they planned to continue to be involved in their child's education and reported that being involved in a learning group had a positive impact on their parent-child relationship and on their own confidence in joining other learning groups. Four of the five parents were partaking in further learning/courses. There was a real sense of the parenting programme as having been an experience which provided an opportunity for personal development and a greater feeling of general well-being. Ellie described it:

So I have to say I'm doing an awful lot more, and I'm really enjoying it, getting my brain working again. Then I'm meeting different people, and I'm not just mammy all the time or mam, I'm Ellie and I'm enjoying it.

(Ellie- in depth interview)

Another significant factor which must be taken into consideration is the fact that all parents interviewed who had completed the parenting programme or were participating on a programme as in the case of the focus group could be termed "supporters" as described in Bleach's (2010) research. In the literature review Bleach (2010) highlighted the need for parents to have the confidence to deal with the mainstream education system. Opinions were consistent across the one to one interviews and the focus group regarding their participation

on the parenting programme not effecting change in their child's behaviour/approach to learning in school. This can be attributed Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and to parent's view of them as not affecting change at system level. Bleach (2010) categorised these parents as "supporters". They may be actively involved with the school but they do not question or challenge the authority of the school and they perceive the school and the teacher as having primary responsibility for the education of their children. Parents' rights are acknowledged but are perceived to be in harmony with the interests of the school and the teachers (Bleach, 2010). Some of parents spoke of their child having settled in school; Ellie spoke of her daughter who, due to behaviour issues had been in the School Principal's office three times prior to her participation on the programme. This child now has her photograph and certificate "pupil of the week" displayed in the principal's office. When questioned Ellie did not directly attribute this change in the child's behaviour to her own participation on the parent programme but rather saw it as the child just now being settled in school and attributed it to the teacher's expertise and the school system of compliance.

Parental involvement

Through this study it has become evident that the issue of parental involvement in education is a complex matter. This study set out to document the experiences of parents participating on a parenting programme which is delivered in school settings. Epstein (1995) has distinguished six types of parental involvement: parenting; communication; volunteering; home tutoring; involvement in decision-making and collaboration within the community. The study found some evidence of parent/teacher collaboration, volunteering and collaboration with a community organisation. It has gone toward an understanding of the potential of parenting programmes as a vehicle for building relationships with schools. Further analysis could be conducted through an action research study of the implementation of a parenting

programme based in a school with a focus on the dynamics of the relationships between the parents, providers, teachers and the school management.

Parenting programmes

In this study parents' experiences offered valuable information on their perceptions of how the programme worked for them. In contrast with other research it did not inquire into aspects related to living in a disadvantaged community or address issues such as retention rates. Furlong and Mc Gilloway's (2012) evaluation of the Incredible Years parenting programme included an exploration of the social context for parents. They identify living in a disadvantaged community "clearly leads to extra challenges for parents participating in a parenting programme." (Furlong and Mc Gilloway, 2012, p. 626). A further narrative inquiry with the five parents on the theme of social context could provide insights for the development of the work with families. The gendered nature of participation on parenting programmes and of parental involvement in schools (Reay, 1998 cited in Hornby and Lafaele, 2011, p. 42) are also topics for further research.

I would be very interested in conducting a study comprising a comparative analysis of female and male experience of participating on the programme. The findings of this study suggest that the Incredible Years parenting programme is appealing to the male approach to learning where there are strategies and techniques that can be introduced in the home. The male perspective on learning was expressed through language such as "balance" "things worked out". The women while aware of the strategies expressed their learning in an affective language using words such as "enjoying" and "closer".

Implications for policy and practice

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is described as “firmly committed to the transformation of Ireland’s children and family services. At the heart of this reform programme is the creation of a new Child and Family Support Agency.” This emerging Child and Family Support Agency will play a key role in supporting parents to improve outcomes for children and young people. The indicators are that it will address the policy and provision gaps identified in Clavero’s (2001) review of Irish policy on family support services. The inclusion of The National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) under the auspices of the Child and Family Support Agency (CFSA) will see the provision of the Home School Community Liaison scheme and School Completion Programmes now being directed at policy level by the CFSA. At this point it is difficult to predict the impacts this may have on the continued provision of parenting programmes within the realms of a home/school/community model.

Therefore, in my role as Incredible Years Co-ordinator I will focus on the key practice implication emerging from this study, which is the contribution of the community education model to the delivery of parenting programmes. I will continue to advocate the use of community education principles, methodologies and practices drawing on my reading throughout this degree programme particularly on place-based and communities of practice models advocated by Wenger (2010) and Edmonds-Cady and Sosuliski (2012).

Conclusion

This thesis enquired into the extent to which community based parenting programmes have the potential to impact upon existing measures to combat educational disadvantage in a

community where formal education providers are banded in the DEIS initiative. The Literature Review applied Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory to explain the learning experience of the parents and introduced the theoretical framework of the study; the delivery of the parenting programmes within the three interlocking spheres of the home, the school and the community. The research was carried out within a social constructionist paradigm using a narrative inquiry approach as the intention was to make sense of the parents' experiences under the themes: reflections on participating, learning from the programme and the relationship with the school. The findings were organised within themes and presented in the thematic analysis of Chapter Five.

My research question: *In what way do parenting programmes delivered within the realms of a home/school/community model build relationships between parents and mainstream education?* The study finds that the delivery of parenting programmes within the home/school community model builds relationships with class teachers and contributes to parents volunteering in classrooms and getting involved in other educational programmes. Thus parenting programmes can be described as a piece in the education jigsaw. However, the findings did not indicate that parenting programmes build relationships between parents and schools at a system level. In conclusion, the findings indicate that transformative learning is an overarching theme in the delivery of community based parenting programme and that learning is attributed to the process of community education.

Closing reflections

Throughout the MEd programme we were encouraged to be reflexive in our approach to our research projects. Adult and community education is not only about providing learning opportunities, it must also be critically reflective of the "manner in which" learning and teaching are carried out. This issue of the "manner in which" the research was carried out was

paramount amount for me and it was one of the reasons I chose not to name the community or the project where the research was carried out.

Many published research studies apply quantitative methodologies and report changes in child behaviour, parental stress and maternal depression rates and detail a cost benefit analysis of delivering parenting programmes in community settings. Placing parents' experiences, thoughts and feelings as participants of a community based parenting programme as central to this study has contributed to making this research project an interesting, informative and inspiring experience for me. The study also endeavoured to investigate the potential of the parenting programme to build relationships between parents and mainstream education. This aspect of the study was, on reflection, over ambitious within the timeframe and requires further investigation.

Finally, as a practitioner occasionally involved in the delivery of parenting programmes delivered within the realms of a home/school/community model, while this study has been challenging the reassuring words of the parents who participated on this journey with me have been re-affirming and have steered this project to completion.

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