

**Title**

**The Silent Partners?**

**Leading parental involvement in primary schools in areas  
experiencing educational inequality**

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## **Table of contents**

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Abbreviations Explanatory Guide</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>Data Collection Tools</b>
<b>1a</b>	Parent Questerview <b>1</b>
<b>1b</b>	Sample Interview Template <b>11</b>
<b>1c</b>	Sample Overview Interview Template <b>22</b>
<b>Appendix 2</b>	<b>School Briefing Document</b> <b>29</b>
<b>Appendix 3</b>	<b>School Poster</b> <b>33</b>
<b>Appendix 4</b>	<b>Table of Epstein definitions</b> <b>34</b>

## **Abstract**

This research project explored and examined parental involvement in two primary school with an emphasis on 'leading' this involvement. Both schools were situated in designated DEIS Urban Band 1 areas in Dublin. DEIS Urban Band 1 schools are identified as areas of high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. The project was contextualised within the current national policy which has committed to parents as partners in their child's education and the evidence from international literature clearly linking parental involvement to positive child educational achievement and experience. The study examined the efforts at engagement from an equality and social inclusion perspective.

The project used a case study approach with a comparative element in that it was carried out in a National Primary school under Catholic patronage and a school under the Educate Together umbrella. Qualitative methods were used to gather the data. These included 'questerviews', interviews, observation and existing document reviews.

The research identifies a range of complexities involved in leading parental involvement in primary school. This appears to be especially the case in areas of designated disadvantage. The research also outlines a range of opportunities that exist to facilitate inclusive parental involvement. It clearly highlights the importance of 'clear intention' and 'strong leadership focused on involving parents', 'relationships' and capacity for 'management of the affective elements', 'communication style and methods', 'values', 'persistence' and 'a commitment and an ability to prioritise parental involvement within an already packed school agenda and curriculum' as key elements of leading and facilitating effective and inclusive parental involvement.

Key words: parental involvement, leadership, communication, relationship, socially just and inclusive parental involvement, values, priorities, the affective element

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## **Abbreviations Explanatory Guide**

<b>BOM</b>	Board of Management
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion
<b>ET</b>	Educate Together
<b>HSCL</b>	Home School Community Liaison
<b>IPPN</b>	Irish Primary Principals' Network
<b>NPC</b>	National Parents Council
<b>PA</b>	Parents' Association
<b>SCP</b>	School Completion Programme

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

This research explores and examines parental involvement in two primary schools from the perspective of 'leading' parental involvement. Much of the research that already exists regarding parental involvement is generally focused on parents from a middle class context. This research focuses on leading parents whose children attend schools in areas designated as disadvantaged by the DES and are therefore categorised as DEIS Band 1 schools. These areas consistently experience educational inequality in terms of student participation and outcomes. Both schools in this research are identified within the DEIS Urban Band 1 category. The research is contextualised within the current national policy which is committed to parents as partners in the child's education and the evidence from literature clearly linking parental involvement to positive child educational achievement and experience (Chen, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Desimone, 1999; Foster & Loven, 1992; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999, Epstein 1994 and the European Commission's Includ-Ed 2011). Research also indicates that there are benefits to parental involvement in schools at a number of other levels i.e. school staff level (Cotton and Reed Wikelund, 2001), parental level and at wider community and societal level (OECD 1997, p 22-27; Wolfe and Haveman 2002). It is also widely recognised that levels of parental involvement in areas of designated disadvantage or with marginalised parents does not occur in the ways either teachers or parents would like (Dauber & Epstein, 1991; Epstein & Lee, 1995; Epstein & Sanders 2000). Research has demonstrated the differences between groups of parents in the resources they have to support their child's learning. Middle class parents have been found to have a greater familiarity with the education system and can therefore navigate and support their child through the schooling system using their 'insider' knowledge and networks (Lareau 2000). Despite the common opinion expressed that parents from lower



socio-economic groups do not have a value on education or have high educational aspirations for their children, two recent reports indicate that high aspirations are apparent across all parents (Williams et al., 2009; Byrne and Smyth, 2011). Considering the continued disproportionate representation in terms of a variety of socio-economic groupings at 3<sup>rd</sup> level (McCoy et al 2010) it can be argued that it is not what parents aspire for their children or what they value for the children but what cultural, social and financial resources they have available to them to support the required education process for their child. This research takes cognisance of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in that regard.

### **Aims of the research**

The research aims are

- To explore the commitment to and actual levels of engagement of parents as partners within each of the schools
- To determine what constitutes parental involvement in the two schools
- To explore and examine the leadership approaches operating within the two schools in relation to parental involvement
- To establish the relevance and use of best practice in engaging the parents and informing the work generally with the parents in the schools

Given the focus on parental involvement in areas consistently experiencing educational inequality in terms of participation and outcomes, the research examines the efforts at engagement from an inclusive, social justice and equity perspective. The social, economic and cultural landscape that the research was carried out in requires that the

research explore the parental involvement through a lens that is cognisant of what an inclusive, what a socially just and what an equity based approach to leading looks like. Research has identified that schools are key players in determining the patterns of inequality in society. As the emphasis on knowledge-based industry and services increase in the global economy and considering a school's role in producing and disseminating cultural products, schools have become increasingly powerful players in determining life chances and in determining the ordering of cultural relations (Lynch and Lodge, 2002).

The research acknowledges the dual role the school system holds, in that it can act as a reproductive agent, in this case of inequalities, but can also act as a transformative agent if it acknowledges the system's role in that reproduction and seeks to implement inclusive actions and strategies for change. The European Commission's Includ-Ed research project (2006-2011) is predicated on schools firstly being reproductive agents and secondly transformative agents. This project, which will be referenced further later, aims to analyse educational actions that contribute to social cohesion and educational actions that lead to social exclusion. It seeks to identify and clarify what works and what does not work in terms of student success and social inclusion.

### **Research approach**

The research approach used was from the subjective, interpretative tradition. This approach accommodated the complexities involved in knowledge creation about parental involvement in schools, particularly in areas of designated disadvantage. Cognisance was also taken of the role of power and power distance and potential structural barriers. The research aims to provide a meaningful explanatory element to the knowledge created. The concept of power will be further discussed in the

Literature Review chapter particularly in terms of the approach to the research process and the role of power in education processes.

The research is approached from a critical theory perspective and using a case study methodology. A “critical” theory may be distinguished from a “traditional” theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation, “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer 1982, 244). This approach was taken in order to recognise the social, socio-economic, cultural and educational contexts in which the study is being carried out. This study, as a critical theory study, seeks to identify and explain what is wrong with the current social reality, identify the actors that can change it and provide clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (Bohman, 2010). Based on Ribbins and Gunter’s (2002) ‘Knowledge Provinces’, both critical research and axiological research are relevant knowledge domains for this research process. Ribbins and Gunter identify critical research as that concerned with revealing and emancipating practitioners from various forms of social injustice and oppression of established but unjustifiable structures and processes of power.

Lynch and Lodge (2002) identify the importance of a multi-disciplinary debate on inequalities in education. They call on those engaged in sociological inquiry to broaden the conceptualisation and analysis of their work to include egalitarian theory and political theory. Emerging from their dialogue with egalitarian theory they suggest that sociological reality is not simply a world of facts, it is also a world of values. As researchers we need to find ways to ‘deal with’ how values inform, underpin and impact the work we do. In critiquing those that propose a separation between ethical and empirical analysis and a clear distinction between fact and value, Lynch and Lodge identify the assumptions that

have traditionally framed social class inequality research e.g. as a degendered and politically neutral issue, which thereby prevents the multi-faceted debate occurring regarding the complexities involved. Values influence what we choose to research, how we frame the research questions and how we interpret the findings (Lynch 2002).

A case study approach was selected for this research project. The common characteristics across a number of the definitions of case study appears to be a huge weighting on 'context' and the recognition that context is a powerful determinant of cause and effect. The capacity within case study analysis to provide understanding for how ideas and more abstract principles work side by side and the capacity to work within the complexities of 'real life' situations is also identified as components of case study research (Denzin & Lincoln (2000); Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg, (1991) and Yin (1984, 1994) ). Two school sites will be looked at within the primary school system. The data collection techniques employed by the researcher for this research included 'Questerviews', (Adamson, Gooberman-Hill, Woolhead, Donovan, 2004; Mulcahy 2006) Observation, Semi structured interviews and a review of existing documents by the researcher.

### **Research relevance**

The relevance and significance of this research lies in its attempt to explore and identify how leadership is interfacing with parental involvement in schools in areas identified as disadvantaged. This is important given the wealth of evidence connecting parental involvement to not only positive student learning experience and outcomes but also the wider impact at parental, school staff, community and societal levels. It is also relevant given the body of literature identifying that parental involvement is more problematic and occurring less in areas identified as disadvantaged or in families identified in lower social groupings (Coleman

et al 1996; Jencks et al 1972; Karabel and Halsey 1977; Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980; Epstein 1985, 1990, 1992, 1995, 2001, 2002; Lareau 2000; Hanafin and Lynch 2002). Given the cyclical and intergenerational nature of educational inequality and its presence in not just families but whole communities, identifying what constitutes an effective and inclusive leadership model for schools in areas experiencing inequality may have the potential to effect real change in levels of parental involvement. Given the evidence already suggesting how parental involvement has a wider impact, this could in the longer term potentially contribute to an improvement in educational equality in terms of participation and outcome in areas designated as disadvantaged. It is the researcher's hope that this research can contribute beyond an instrumental aim of creating knowledge regarding leadership and parental involvement for student outcomes/achievement. This research aims to contribute to the equity and social justice debate by exploring leadership approaches in schools that impact at parental involvement level. The research can contribute to the school improvement agenda, by encouraging it to extend itself beyond pupil outcomes to inclusive practices with parents, which would lead to a genuine and meaningful engagement with all parents.

## **Context of the research**

### **Historical and legislative national context**

In the Irish context the role of parents in the education of the child is supported by the Constitution. In the 1937 Constitution parents are acknowledged as the primary educators of their children:

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. (Article 42.1)

Clarke (1998) and Coolahan (2000) have contrasted the strong Constitutional basis for parental influence on education with the low levels of actual involvement. Historically neither the Church nor the State made purposeful or systematic efforts during the 1940s and 1950s to involve parents in policy-making, consultation or the administration of schools (Coolahan 2000). It was not until the 1960's that the public interest increased in relation to education and there was more scope for stakeholder groups e.g. teachers, parents and students to express their individual opinions. There was as Coolahan described 'a greater tolerance and more scope for the expression of group and individual opinions by teachers, parents and students ... in evidence' (Coolahan, 2000, p. 132). In 1975 the governance structures of schools were changed with Boards of Management, including teachers and parents working alongside the Patron's nominees, being established for the first time. Parents Associations and Councils have been the main formal structure for parental involvement with the National Parents Council being established in 1985 as a national support structure for local associations and councils.

The White Paper on Education, Charting Our Education Future (1995), which formed the basis for the Education Act of 1998, emphasised the partnership element of the educational process. It identified the learner at the centre of this process with parents, teachers, patrons, local community and the State as the partners in learner's education. The acknowledgement of the parent role brings both rights and responsibilities i.e. the right as an individual to be consulted and informed on all aspects of the child's education and as a group to be active participants in the education system at a school, regional and national level. It also brings the responsibility to nurture a learning environment, co-operate with and support the school and other

educational partners and fulfil their special role in the development of the child (1995, p4).

Statutory recognition was given to Parents Associations/Councils in the Education Act in 1998. At a local level, parents were given the right to establish Parents Associations. According to the Act the role of these Parents Associations would be to 'advise the Principal or the Board on any matter relating to the school' and to 'adopt a programme of activities which will promote the involvement of parents, in consultation with the Principal, in the operation of the school'. The Education Act 1998 also identifies that schools are to involve parents in school planning and that all parents are to be given a copy of the school plan. Parental representation on school Boards of Management was consolidated in the Act and Boards were given the responsibility of developing procedures about informing parents regarding their child's education.

The Education Act (1998) was intended to foster home-school links by improving the information flow to parents regarding their child's progress specifically and school policy generally. This was following the White Paper's (1995) emphasis on the importance of the development of dynamic and supportive links between home and school.

### **Responses to 'Disadvantage' at a national level**

The Home School Community Liaison scheme had been established in 1990 as one of the measures to address Educational Disadvantage. The purpose of the scheme was to increase co-operation between school, parents and community organizations in the education of children and young people. The scheme was focused on home visiting, running courses for parents and the development of a local committee to include all stakeholders. This work was delivered by the school's Home School Liaison Co-ordinator who was a teacher from the school and was based

in the school. Initially the scheme involved the appointment of 30 Co-ordinators in 55 primary schools. These primary schools were large and in designated areas of urban disadvantage. After the first year it was extended to a further 25 primary schools and to 13 post-primary schools. In 2009, 340 primary school and 203 post-primary schools were involved in the scheme.

Under DEIS (2005) there have been some changes to the national management and support of the scheme. Following a review by the Department of Education and Skills of its national programmes addressing educational disadvantage, an action plan for social inclusion DEIS, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools was published in 2005. DEIS is now the framework for all programmes historically aimed at addressing disadvantage and promotes a more integrated approach to the issue of educational inclusion. This new integrated approach, the School Support Programme brings together the range of schemes that have been initiated by the DES i.e. Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) and School Completion Programme (SCP). These schemes are now located under the National Education Welfare Board, which reports on progress in relation to integration. DEIS has identified that 'a renewed emphasis will be placed on the involvement of parents and families in children's education' (p40).

It is worth noting some of the findings in relation to the evaluations of the Home School Community Liaison scheme as both schools involved in this research have a HSCL Co-ordinator. Ryan (1994) identified that while the brief was to include liaison with teachers and community organizations an examination of the actual workload identified that two thirds of the HSCL Co-ordinator's time was spent on direct work with parents. This involved parental attendance at courses e.g. child's education related course, personal development, parenting and home



management. The scheme had built in evaluation mechanisms from its initiation which did indicate some positive impact (Ryan 1994, 1999). The HSCL Co-ordinators and teachers did identify improved personal development among the parents involved with a higher involvement in schools. Impact at primary level was stronger than at post-primary. However the programme's positive effects were generally with parents who were actively involved in activities and were those parents who from the teachers' perspectives were in least need of the scheme. A survey with uninvolved mothers indicated that they experienced greater socio-economic disadvantage (coming from unemployed households, were single parents or had a lot of children) than those who were participating on the scheme. One of the main aims of the scheme was to counter educational disadvantage among the children by involving their parents in school life. Co-ordinators perceived effects on some pupils e.g. attendance, behaviour and positive attitudes to school however few teachers identified any immediate effects (Ryan 1994).

More recent evaluations (Archer, 2006) identified the scheme as having a positive effect. However it was more at the level of attitudinal change than behavioural change. The approach and measures relating to Educational Disadvantage more generally in Ireland will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Other policy initiatives and strategy documents addressing the area of parental involvement include: Early Start Programmes, targeting 3 year olds in areas of designated disadvantage; DES Statement of Strategy 2005-2007 emphasises the promotion of partnership in policy development at both national and local level. Information flow to parents is an important consideration according to this document; DES Statement of Strategy 2008-2010 further refers to the role of parents as partners and/or consumers of education; the NCCA has identified the

importance of forging strong links between schools, parents and teachers to enable as successful an education as possible for the child.

### **International context**

The on-going and increasing commitment in Ireland to identifying the importance of parental involvement in schools is clear from a policy perspective. Other countries differ in the extent to which parents are regarded as partners in the education process rather than external to the school system (OECD, 1997). Therefore the opportunities for formal parental involvement in education varies across countries. As in Ireland, structures like Parent Associations and involvement on school governing bodies, do exist in many countries. (Eurydice, 2005). Unfortunately, as has been demonstrated in the small amount of research carried out into the area of parental involvement, the existence of formal structures for parental involvement does not in itself ensure a 'voice' since many parents feel their involvement is limited to practical rather than policy issues (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2003b). Studies from a number of countries also identify that parental involvement is less evident as children become older (Williams et al., 2002; Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 1995) and that parents parenting alone, in economically difficult circumstances and/or with lower levels of education are less likely to get involved in such structures (OECD, 1997) *unless* schools continuously actively work at building positive partnerships (Epstein & Lee, 1995; Epstein & Sanders 2000).

There is no doubt of the high level of policy attention that parental involvement in schools has received in recent decades. However there has been relatively little research carried out to date on the actual level and nature of such involvement particularly in Ireland. Some of the research that has been carried out will be discussed as part of the Literature Review in the next Chapter.

## **Context of the researcher**

The researcher has worked in areas designated as disadvantaged for thirteen years. During that time she has been part of the teaching staff in the formal school system and also part of community based services working with families and schools addressing and resolving issues relating to education access, participation and outcome. She has spent the predominant amount of that time in a variety of community based organisations. This professional experience and a set of personal beliefs and values have contributed to four key assumptions underlying this research process 1) inequalities in education are unjust and must be changed 2) the school-parent relationship is a cornerstone of addressing that inequality 3) the leadership in the school has a role in creating the conditions necessary for a participative dialogue to facilitate a transformative school parent relationship 4) the need to examine school leadership further to contribute to the knowledge base addressing inequalities in education.

The researcher has worked in the Community where one of the school's is situated for nine years. One of the main advantages to this in terms of this research was access to a number of schools that had a longstanding, productive and effective professional working relationship with the researcher over the nine years. Access was a concern given the sensitivity and lack of existing research on the substantive topic. One of the disadvantages to this position concerned the philosophy underpinning the research and the emphasis on a critical theory approach. The researcher was aware of this in terms of maintaining research boundaries while also acknowledging that it was the working relationship that had facilitated access. This will be discussed further under ethical considerations in Chapter 3.

### **Researcher's value position in relation to 'education disadvantage'**

It is also important for the researcher to outline her value position in relation to leading parental involvement in areas experiencing inequality and contextualising it in terms of the most recent responses to disadvantage/inequality. In doing that it is important that the researcher give some time to a discussion on 'education disadvantage' and what perspective she approaches the research from in this context. Educational disadvantage is a situation in which people derive less benefit from the education system relative to their peers. It presents itself in many ways, most obviously in low levels of participation and achievement in the education system. Educational disadvantage is closely linked to the issues of poverty and social exclusion. A substantial body of research (Boldt & Devine, 1998; Smyth & Hannon, 2000; Clancy, 2001; Kellaghan, 2002) over the last four decades confirms that individuals from poorer socio-economic and socially excluded backgrounds are more likely to underachieve in the education system than their peers from higher income backgrounds.

The state has responded with many programmes and supports for individual students in an attempt to ensure they reach their potential within the education system. These schemes have thus far been unsuccessful in achieving the momentous change required, to ensure that particular areas of our city and country consistently perform less well in the current educational measuring tools i.e. state examinations. This may be due to fact that these schemes originate in a definition of Educational Disadvantage found in the Education Act (Ireland, 1998:32 (9))

*“the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools”.*

The researcher would suggest that if we must operate from a definition of educational disadvantage, (her preference would be that we operate from one of educational equity), we would at least need to operate from the definition put forward by Boldt and Devine (1998:10) which refers to educational disadvantage as the “limited ability to derive equitable benefit from schooling compared to one’s peer by age”.

For the Education Act, educational disadvantage prevents learners from deriving appropriate benefit from education system as a result of social and economic constraints, whereas Boldt and Devine emphasise an inability to derive equitable or equal benefit from the system. Obviously the objective of policy and practice within these two definitions are very different. For the former it is to enable individual learners to reach that potential (though who measures what that potential should be, is another debate), whereas for the latter it would be to ensure that low income and socially excluded groups and communities participate in and achieve to equivalent levels as those, from more privileged backgrounds, across all sectors of the education system thereby enabling them to have equal life chances into the future.

Supports targeted at individuals presume that society and the education system are ‘meritocratic’, i.e. those who have ability and are prepared to put in the effort, deserve to succeed. This concept of meritocracy supports and accepts the belief that fundamental inequalities will always exist in society. This focus assumes that those who underachieve do so due to deficits within themselves, a concept referred to as ‘cultural deprivation’ or the cultural deficit model as cautioned against by Hanafin

and Lynch (2002). Kathleen Lynch (1999) identifies that this thinking operates by identifying the victims of a societal problem as the source of that problem. Whereas those who succeed in education deserve their achievement on account of their superior ability and effort, those individuals who do not succeed—and, by implication, their families and communities—are considered to lack core competencies and values required for success in the system.

As already stated the measures put in place to target extra resources at individuals may well have impacted for some of these individuals but the cycle of education inequality, concentrated in areas of lower socio-economic wealth continues. The research supports the view that in addressing equitable benefits for learners, policy makers need to focus on strategies, which reduce inequalities at a systemic level rather than a plethora of supports targeted at individuals. It is from this perspective that the researcher approaches the area of parental involvement. An underlying belief of this view and approach is that educational inequality is symptomatic of a wider structural societal inequality, that these inequalities can be reduced and that strategies employed need to focus on changing the system and not solely the victims of inequality.

The research does not subscribe to a deficit model of educational disadvantage, which views the individuals not achieving within the system as having some deficit which needs to be compensated in some way. This is more a question of educational equality—of condition, opportunity, experience, treatment, benefit and outcome. The causes of this inequality are multi-layered and complex and the researcher supports the view that they are symptomatic of wider social inequalities which reproduce themselves systemically. The education system itself unfortunately tends to contribute to social reproduction and the production of inequality (Lareau 1987, Teese 2000, Linguard et al. 2003).

It also however has enormous potential to influence and act to change some of the inherent practices which contribute to the on-going cycle of inequality.

### **Definitions**

Epstein and Sheldon (2006) identified a set of principles to help researchers in building on Epstein's vast research on parental involvement. One of these principles was that *school, family and community partnership* is a better term than *parental involvement*. Given the national context and framework to this research study and the paucity of research in this area in Ireland, it was deemed that to retain the term parental involvement for this research was more appropriate. The rationale and value in moving the debate into a discussion framed under the definition of *school, family and community partnerships* is acknowledged. However in order to gain maximum benefit from that debate, some debate must take place first under the definition of parental involvement.

The focus of this study is on parental involvement in schools with schools being the formal setting for education processes. This is no way undervalues the informal education process that is on-going in homes. Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence supports our understanding of how these interact and influence each other. This will be discussed further in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2 reviews literature relevant to the research. This includes literature on parental involvement, leadership, educational leadership and social inclusion/equity. Chapter 3 identifies the research approach presenting a Case Study metaphor designed for this research, describes the research design, theoretical underpinnings and data collection methods and also highlights how the data was collected and analysed.

Ethical considerations, timeframes and validity are also discussed in this Chapter. Chapter 4 presents findings in relation to the two school sites and commentary on these findings. Chapter 5 contains findings in relation to the three overarching interviews. The final Chapter discusses key findings in relation to the substantive, theoretical and methodological issues. This includes an evaluation of the research design in the light of the findings and the use of the theoretical framework and methods selected. The Chapter also contains a number of recommendations for audiences at local and national level.



## **Chapter 2 Review of Literature**

***“An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage. The issue of social justice is not an add-on; it is fundamental to a good education.”***

Connell (1995), p57

### **Introduction**

This chapter aims to give a critical and focused review of a range of relevant literature which underpins this research process. The literature reviewed for the purpose of this research included studies focused on parental involvement in schools, leadership, educational leadership and studies in relation to addressing issues of inclusion, social justice and equity in schooling. It also seeks to a) outline the landscape that has been created by the existing knowledge base relevant to this research and b) to identify the key and most relevant issues arising from the literature review for this research process in terms of its development.

### **Themes emerging from the literature review**

There are a number of key themes emerging from the literature review. The research themes that initially informed the research in focusing on this research question and which have existed as a body of evidence for a number of years now were re-iterated numerous times in the literature reviewed. The themes identified in the literature were a) a longstanding and overwhelming evidence linking parental involvement and positive student outcomes b) an ever increasing policy attention to the subject of parental involvement in schools c) the link between socio-economic situations and parental involvement and d) the link between socio-economic situations and educational inequality. The themes that

specifically relate to the research and which influenced the research approach, methodology design and theoretical framework were

- ❖ a lack of research into actual levels and nature of that involvement in an Irish context
- ❖ a lack of research on educational leadership and parental involvement
- ❖ the importance of the meaning, the conceptualisation and the enactment attached to ‘dialogue’, ‘ethos’, ‘values’, ‘relationship’, ‘respect’ and ‘understanding’ in the leadership construct in relation to parental involvement rather than a focus on an actual leadership model
- ❖ the need to identify clearly what is required from leadership to ‘facilitate’ authentic, meaningful and transformative parental involvement
- ❖ the need to engage in a critical and analytical dialogue and interrogation around the impact of the ‘education improvement agenda’ as a basis for committing to parental involvement, engaging in parental involvement strategies and in researching and creating a knowledge base for leadership and parental involvement.

### **Parental involvement in schools**

In 1932 Waller argued that “the fact seems to be that parents and teachers are natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other. The chasm is frequently covered over, for neither parents nor teachers wish to admit to themselves the uncomfortable implications of their animosity, but on occasion it can make itself clear enough” (p. 68). Eighty years on, there has been progress in the acknowledgement of the importance and value of the home school partnership. We see this through the policy commitments to parental involvement identified in Chapter One in terms of the statutory status given to it and the

development of formal structures to facilitate this representation both at the level of school policy development and at school governance level. The existing research on home school partnership, particularly over the last twenty nine years has focussed mainly on parental involvement as part of school reform and/or improvement (Coleman, 1987; Cotton and Reed 2001, Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein 1985, 1990, 1992, 1995, 2001; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Epstein & Sheldon 2005; Flouri, E. 2006, Henderson and Mapp, 2002, Heymann 2000, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Often the studies have focussed on what were initially seen as two distinct elements

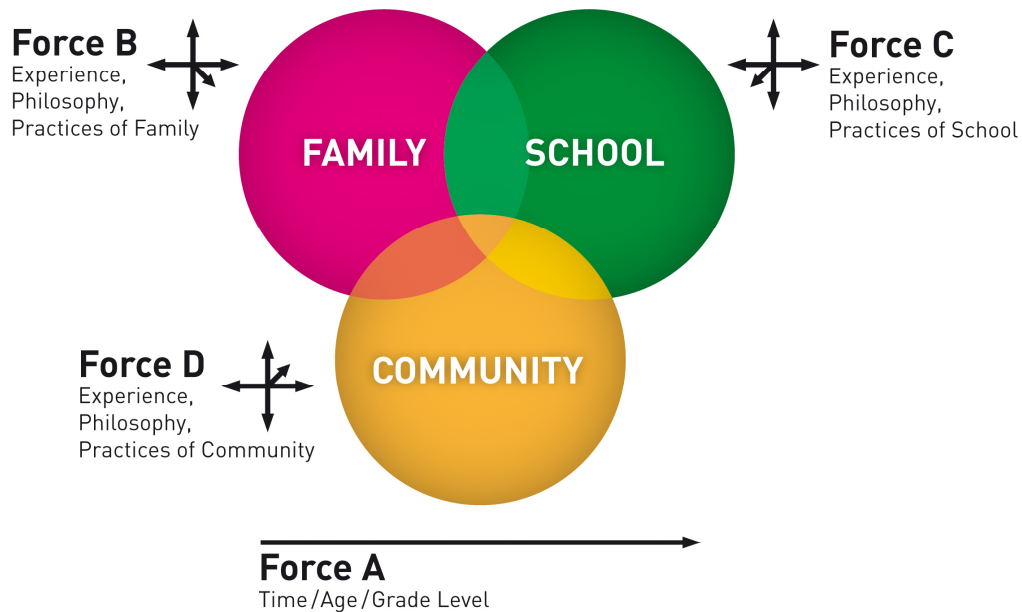
- 1) the family learning environment and parental role and
- 2) the school role and programmes

The limitations of this binary approach were highlighted in 1990 when Epstein identified that sociologists of the family rarely studied how family practices affect student success at school or how school practices affect family attitudes, interactions and practices and that sociologists of education studying school and classroom organisation rarely examined how school practices affect home environments, or how family cultures, attitudes and practices affect school practices and effects. The connection between parental involvement and positive student outcome, as identified in Chapter One, has been evidenced in a range of studies (Chen, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Desimone, 1999; Foster & Loven, 1992; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999, Epstein 1994 and European Commission Include-Ed report 2011). Despite Epstein's insights and findings, the majority of the work on parental involvement has, perhaps unsurprisingly, focused mainly on the education agenda of how the parents can become more involved in order to improve student

achievement, improve student attendance, increase positive school attitudes for parents and student and improve parent satisfaction with teachers (Chen, 2001; Desimone, 1999; Foster & Loven, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). The researcher argues that the foundation, rationale and value base at the core of this knowledge creation has yet to, and may never, positively impact parental involvement in schools particularly with those who may need some support to get involved.

Other evidence identifies that parental involvement in schools has more far reaching impacts than simply student academic outcomes. Benefits for parents themselves, teachers, schools, the wider community and society have also been identified (Cotton and Reed Wikelund 2001; OECD 1997, 2003; Wolfe and Haveman 2002). This is important in the context of this research study which is examining parental involvement and the leading of it in areas experiencing consistent education inequality. From the researcher's perspective there are two strands to this 1) a rationale and justification, for those that may need it, to commit to ensuring that those parents who do not get involved are reached out to and engaged through school wide 'inclusive practices' and 2) the potential wide reaching impacts of leading effective parental involvement, which could be a key contributor to a series of planned and systemic strategies addressing area wide intergenerational educational inequality. An examination of these potential wide reaching impacts is beyond the scope of this study but is the context of understanding in which this research study is based. This study could be viewed as a precursor to such work.

Epstein's findings and her research based idea of the overlapping spheres of influence is highly relevant for this research process.



**Fig 1 Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence**

Here is the idea of the school viewing the learner as child and not merely student in school and then of the family viewing the child as student as well as child in the family and all the time operating in overlapping spheres of influence i.e. family, school and community. The identification of the other factors at play within, outside of and between those spheres of influence having an input to the actual influence e.g. experience, philosophy, practices, age of child, time etc. emphasises and reiterates the importance and the potential of recognising the connectedness (and potential points of tension) of the social structures surrounding a child's learning. This could suggest that the interaction and dynamic of these spheres of influence can also have impact on each of these social structures beyond the individual child. Research has

demonstrated that programmes and practices of partnership make a difference in whether, how and which families are involved in their child's education (Epstein & Lee, 1995; Epstein & Sanders 2000). Policy has increasingly promoted this kind of partnership approach in the Irish Education system particularly over the last 20 years. It is the researcher's view that there continues to be a gap between what research and policy states and how partnership is being approached and facilitated on the ground. Through this research she hopes to firstly establish if that is the case and if it is to contribute to an understanding of why it might be the case and what schools, teachers, families can do to address this.

In the United States Epstein has been influential in addressing the educational community's resistance to working collaboratively with those outside their areas of expertise including parents. In the researcher's view one of the key elements of Epstein's approach is her strong advocacy for schools to take a *planned and active role* in involving parents. This view is also advocated by Veen when she, in discussing parent-teacher communication, identifies that "school as the professional partners is the initiator in this. Schools must demonstrate supportive behaviour towards parents so that parents behave in an educationally supportive way towards the school" (Veen, Annemiek (1999), p44).

Much of the sociological interpretive work completed on parental involvement cautions about the institutional, structural, power and ideological dichotomies concerning the partnership between teachers and parents (Brantlinger, 2003; Lightfoot, 1978; Waller, 1932; Henry, 1996; Lareau, 1989). This work is particularly relevant in the context of this research given the policy focus on partnership approaches and the socio-economic indicators of the areas where the schools are situated, the negative experiences in the education system had by some parents living

in these areas and the subsequent levels of academic achievement all of which only serve to consolidate the power dichotomy and to enhance the structural barriers. The apparent power imbalance and ideological and structural dichotomies have all contributed to the theoretical framework underpinning this research. Recognising the imbalance that exists, the researcher engages in a critical inquiry, which seeks to identify the nature of parental involvement in DEIS Band 1 schools, the leadership that facilitates it and to identify what might be changed in order to improve it. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3 under the research approach. In terms of gaining an understanding of parental involvement and the most effective methods of inquiry to use, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler identify that while using psychological inquiry has much to offer in terms of understanding parental involvement in their children's education, it does not give access to the full set of issues involved in comprehensive understanding of parental involvement. "Specifically because the questions and methods of inquiry that guide much psychological research a) focus on learning more about the individual and b) characteristically employ carefully limited (often experimentally controlled) methods of investigation they do not for example offer information about the historical context of school-family relations or about the significant impact that political, economic and social events may have on family school relations.....they offer one window on the full range of issues influencing parental involvement in child and adolescent education" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 5).

For the purpose of this research, parental involvement is viewed in its widest sense. Following the literature review it became apparent that it would be a key part of this research for the participants involved to define parental involvement as they experienced it as part of the process. As identified in Chapter One despite the formal structures that exist to secure parental involvement the research that has been carried out into

the area of parental involvement has demonstrated that the existence of formal structures for parental involvement does not in itself ensure a 'voice' since many parents feel their involvement is limited to practical rather than policy issues (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2003b). Parents can be informally involved in their child's education through supporting their learning, helping with homework and study, advising on educational choices and providing general encouragement in relation to school and regarding educational choices post-compulsory participation (Desforges, 2003). Interestingly, while the formal involvement of parents is more 'visible', research has indicated that informal involvement has a greater influence on children's outcomes (Harris and Goodall, 2007). Some studies have identified the 'affective' support element to this informal involvement. Both O' Hara (1998) and O' Brien (2005) discuss the 'emotional labour' for parents involved in supporting their child's learning. This informal support while ensuring positive outcomes for the child's learning may not facilitate parental 'voice' at school level.

### **Cultural capital**

It is relevant to present some of Bourdieu's work here on cultural capital. There are three main forms of capital i.e. economic, cultural and social. For Bourdieu the distribution of the different forms of capital among individuals determine the chances of success of practices. Cultural capital according to Bourdieu's theory (1986) exists in three forms 1) the *embodied* state, 2) the *objectified* state and 3) the *institutionalised* state. The embodied state relates to that which occurs in the mind and body and requires time and personal acquisition, the objectified state relates to that which is transmitted materially e.g. writings, instruments etc. and the institutionalised state relates to that in the form of academic qualifications. Bourdieu developed his theory in the context of exploring and examining the level and nature of differential academic achievement. Bourdieu accepts 'economic capital' as the dominant element of a



capitalist society however he acknowledges the capacity of 'cultural and social capital' to be translated into resources to achieve. This achievement may then be translated into 'economic capital' or can be used by those who may be poor in economic capital to challenge economic capital as a principle of domination e.g. professionals, intellectuals etc.

In the context of this theory, epistemological questions are raised in relation to the knowledge that is transmitted in our schools and the advantages in terms of the 'cultural capital' some children will start their formal education with, in relation to what constitutes knowledge, how knowledge is to be acquired and achieved and how knowledge is validated and acquisition measured. Children are socialised into the culture that corresponds to their class not merely the societal values as a whole. In Bourdieu's terms this set of cultural experiences, values and beliefs represent a form of 'cultural capital'. Therefore children who have been surrounded by the dominant cultural values of the current education system may appear to the educators to have more capacity to achieve rather than merely having the capacity to 'speak the same language' as the educator. This continues then in relation to the parental involvement in the child's formal education particularly in the case where challenges may emerge. The cultural capital available to the parents to address such challenges at school level and to support the child through the challenges may not be a 'fit' for that required by a system valuing a different cultural capital. The system and the educators in it may mis-interpret the interaction emerging and operating from a different 'cultural currency'.

Reay (1998a) using Bourdieu's theory identifies that there is little evidence to suggest that different social classes view the importance of education differently. She argues that education is in fact seen by all

classes as one of the key factors to social mobility and success. Reay (1998b) as with O' Hara (1998) and O' Brien (2005) cited above emphasises the importance of the 'emotional labour', in relation to mothers particularly in her study, invested in a child's education. Her study demonstrated that middle class mothers are better placed and have greater reserves of cultural capital to support their children through school.

Therefore according to Bourdieu (1986) parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge required to succeed in the current educational system. This suggests that in providing the 'informal' support and the 'emotional labour' identified above that if there is a 'different type of cultural capital' being transmitted, that the informal support may not be what is required or valued by the current education system—a divergent cultural currency if you like. It also raises the issue of 'recognition' in terms of the cultural capital being transmitted and if local parents can relate to the education system. This may have implications in terms of parental involvement and how this is defined and viewed by schools, the scope and type of 'informal support' which may be offered by parents to their children and the value that may be put on this 'informal support' by the school system.

Bourdieu's (1996) work proposes that schools in their current structure cannot promote equality. He identifies it as a myth that schools can be a 'liberating force'. A school's use is one of the foundations of domination and of the legitimation of domination. Bourdieu speaks of cultural and social capital as being inherited. He critiques the education system in its contribution to the reproduction of the social structure by "*sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital*" (p 244). For Bourdieu defining human capital "*does not move beyond economism and ignores,*

*inter alia, the fact that scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family*" (p 244). Reay et al (2009) identify the students in their study as Bourdieu's working-class exceptions that prove the rule and appears to support Bourdieu's argument in this regard. In their case study of nine working class students attending an elite university the different cultural capital in the worlds of home and place of education is evident. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus i.e. something historical and linked to individual history and field in relation to cultural capital is emphasised in this study. This is relevant to parental involvement in that cultural capital is acquired but it flows from habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) which Bourdieu defines as a complex interplay between past and present. Individual histories are vital to understanding the concept of habitus. However as Reay (2004) identifies habitus are permeable and responsive to their context or the field it encounters. Habitus is therefore a product of early childhood experience in particular with regard to socialisation within the family. However it is ever changing by individuals' experiences and interactions with the outside world (Di Maggio, 1979). In Reay et al's study the students display the capacity to move across two very different fields, combining strong connections and loyalties to family and home friends with what are seen to be classically middle-class academic dispositions and which they started to develop in their early school years. It also emerges that what Bourdieu terms a turn towards 'a cultured habitus' occurred mainly due to the students' work on and of the self rather than strong and active support of their teachers. However in the context of this research given the ever-changing dynamic attached to 'habitus' and the potential of the field to influence, it is argued that there is the opportunity to effect transformation if the approach of the educators is 'fit for that purpose'. It is also proposed that 'the field' in its interaction with 'habitus' should develop and be influenced. This is

discussed further under the philosophical underpinnings particularly under Freire.

Feinstein & Symons (1999) suggest that parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on a child's educational outcomes than social class, level of parental education or income. It would therefore appear paramount that a school system can facilitate parental involvement regardless of social class, level of parental education or income. The wide body of research referenced previously would suggest that this has so far not been the case. This 'affective' domain will be discussed further in the Chapter in relation to the equality literature reviewed. In leading parental involvement both the formal and the informal strands need to be addressed and facilitated to ensure an inclusive practice of parental involvement ensues.

Epstein's research based 'Framework of Parental Involvement' clearly identifies six ways in which schools and parents can be involved i.e. Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision Making, Collaborating with the Community. Epstein has also identified challenges & redefinitions from traditional practice for all six of these areas based on her research e.g. under the Communicating Strand, this is not just a one way stream of school to parent but a two way and sometimes maybe even a three way stream of dialogue and feedback between parent school and community. Epstein's research clearly demonstrates that the most successful parental involvement occurs when schools plan and make concerted efforts to engage with parents. Tett (2001) identifies that if parents, particularly those from disadvantaged communities are to fully participate in the educational process "some of the control that professionals have imposed on schooling for so long will have to be released and parents would need to be regarded as people with important contributions to make as

collaborating educational partners” (p 188). The Irish policy context would suggest that there is already a statutory recognition and support for a framework like Epstein’s to be adapted to the Irish context. This research sought in part to identify how parents are involved in the schools identified and whether the conditions and active planning was in place to facilitate successful parental involvement.

In the European Commission’s research project on ‘Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education’ 2006-2011, the role of the family in student outcomes and in student motivation has once again been identified as a key element. This project is operating within a framework of Education’s role in the European goal of social cohesion and of addressing the school systems inability to prevent certain individual and communities from being excluded. This research acknowledges the reproductive role inherent in schools but identifies the transformative potential. As school and community organisations strive to empower children and families to success in education, they promote social capital (Green and Preston, 2001). The Includ-Ed project identifies that any government aiming to increase social capital and social inclusion, must focus on the quality of provision of education (Putman, 2004). It is what constitutes this quality of provision that must be further interrogated and examined. This research advocates for inclusive and meaningful partnerships with parents and the community as part of that quality of provision. The importance of family and community involvement in schools in terms of addressing social inclusion and social cohesion is reiterated in the Includ-Ed project. It demonstrates through its research how schools with community involvement may be schools of the future becoming a central point of reference to communities and a means for improving and sustaining social and economic participation, health awareness, lifelong learning, employment opportunities, academic success and housing within the community (2011, FP 6 project).

As already identified there is a paucity of literature in relation to actual levels of parental involvement and what is happening in relation to that involvement in Ireland. One of the exceptions to that is Mac Giolla Phadraig's work in 2003. This work found a disconnect between the views of teachers and parents in relation to curriculum with parents wishing for a greater level of parental involvement than liked by teachers. In this research both parties equally agreed however to a preference for *consultation* rather than *active partnership* for parents regarding school policy. Given the lack of research carried out generally in relation to parental involvement in Ireland, it is probably not surprising that the 'voice' of the more marginalised parent is virtually impossible to find. Studies focusing on the voices of parents from areas of designated disadvantage are rare. The literature review for this research process confirmed a lack of representation of the most marginalised parents in the research available. Hanafin and Lynch 2002, in their study '*Peripheral Voices: parental involvement, social class and educational disadvantage*', adopted an informal group interview approach to a group of 21 random parents who participated following open invitation to 222. Critical from the outset of cultural deficit approaches (Jensen 1973, Whorf 1956, Mandelbaum, 1964, Bernstein 1971, 1975) the primary aim of this research was to give a voice to parents on the periphery. They caution that the low response rate could indicate that there may be parents who feel even more on the periphery than those who participated. This study identified a number of themes e.g. lack of consultation with parents, difference between communication and consultation, linkage with class teachers, formal structures, decision making. The responses of the parents clearly contradicted assertions made by other sociologists promoting cultural deficit models—all parents interviewed acknowledged and emphasised the importance of education. Interestingly parent's views regarding cultural reproduction focused on

the role of the schools in perpetuating disadvantage within society. While acknowledging the importance of education they questioned the nature and purpose of the knowledge chosen by society to be transmitted in our schools.

## **Leadership**

In the last section some of the existing literature on parental involvement in schools was reviewed. This was important in terms of identifying the scope of parental involvement in schools, how it has been approached as a research area and the evidence that exists to date on levels, its perceived value and the purpose of it. As the focus of this research is on parental involvement and leadership the next section of this chapter will look at studies from leadership and educational leadership. Educational leadership and parental involvement appears to be a somewhat ‘under-researched’ area in Ireland particularly with the small amount of studies on parental involvement focusing on school choice, peripheral voices and transfer from primary to secondary school. There is however already an overwhelming extensive body of research on leadership and educational leadership. The researcher reviewed literature from both the more generic leadership literature and that of leadership specifically in the education context.

Charles Handy (1999) gives us a brief but useful insight into the seven schools of thought of organisation theory identifying also the historical development around the different schools which he identifies as *scientific management, human relations, bureaucratic, power conflict and decisions, technology, systems and institutional*. Similarly Staratt (1993 p. 4) in documenting the chronology of the previous generation of theories identifies the development from scientific management style, positivist epistemology to behaviouristic psychology. Starrat categorises this focus on variables, cognitive abilities, task structure and position power etc. as

instrumental models focusing on behavioural and strategy aspects of leadership. It appears unlikely that there will be any major shift from an instrumental approach to knowledge creation in this area particularly with an ever increasing focus on the school improvement agenda, effective outcomes and evidence based practice. Eacott (2008) identifies the propensity for this type of knowledge creation in the field of educational leadership also. He attributes much of this to the reliance or overuse of the most frequently utilized research methods which according to Eacott focus on what is easily measureable rather than giving us access to the 'leadership sense' something more than just a series of rational choices leading to pre-determined goals, Eacott (2010) p267. He calls for new studies to move beyond what is known and produce a deeper understanding of leadership within the educational context (p266). Despite utilising some of these traditional methods, this research seeks to go beyond the usual in terms of identifying lists of attributes and characteristics that facilitate good leadership in identifying and giving a sense of what, how and who is doing the leading of parental involvement. In focusing on 'leadership' in its widest sense within an equity or a social justice framework, and not just the leader or just the structural constraints, it is hoped that this research will contribute in a meaningful way to the on-going leadership knowledge base. Gronn (2003) strongly proposes for studies to move away from a focus on either the individual(s) or the structural and to bring them into the same debate.

Handy (1999) reminds us that it is only in the last fifteen years that an inter-disciplinary approach to discussion on organisations has emerged. Up until then the theorists were all located in one or other of the supporting disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology or social psychology which will obviously have impacted in terms of their approach and focus e.g. the psychologist relegating all the organisational



determinants of behaviour to the category of 'the environment', something that should be held constant as long as possible in order to permit the study of individuals. Handy (1999) advocates for an eclectic approach when considering the different organisational theories, identifying that drawing on parts of them all has something useful to offer.

He identifies his own work as one which could be primarily categorised under 'people, power and practicalities'. This was particularly relevant in this research context, approach and subject matter and also to the researcher in terms of how they think about organisations.

*"Organizations are to me, first and foremost, fascinating collections of people. The challenge is to make them productive and useful communities. That requires the use of power in its many guises, as well as an understanding of the context of the organisation, of its history and of its purpose—the politics of the practical you might say, or the organization as it really is. I call these the practicalities, because what is the use of all our understanding if we cannot turn it into something practical and useful?" (Handy, 1999 p. 23)*

While identifying with Handy's focus on the importance of the practical this research also takes cognisance of Morgan's point in *Images of Organisation*, that the problem with traditional management perspectives on organisations is that they often lock us into fixed frameworks, offering us *the way* of seeing things and we can often end up trapped by the metaphors on which they are based. Morgan attributes part of this problem to our world's preoccupation with the practical and urges us to become familiar with the theories that are guiding our practice. He reminds us of Kurt Lewin's statement that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Lewin cited in Morgan, 2006, p365) and that practice is never theory free. This is highly relevant for this research question but the researcher's sense is that the practice around parental involvement

in schools is not interrogated, debated or analysed neither in terms of the theory base the policy directives come from nor that which guides the practice on a daily basis.

Charles Handy commits to a philosophical base which is relevant to briefly identify for the purpose of this research. He identifies that he views the study of organisations as more closely linked to a study of history than a study of the physical sciences. He identifies with Bertrand Russell's views on the philosophy of history given at a 1954 lecture, *"History as an Art"*

"Even when causal sequences are established as regards the past, there is not much reason to expect that they will hold in the future, because the relevant facts are so complex that unforeseeable changes may falsify our prediction.....For these reasons I think that scientific laws in history are neither so important nor so discoverable as is sometimes maintained."

Despite the undoubted complexities that have been identified in the development of organisational theory, especially in recent years (Morgan, 2006 p363, Handy, 1999 p20), it is possible to identify key variables, essential factors and required elements of a relationship dynamic which all contribute to the successful planning for an effective organisation and in the context of this research to identify what it is in relation to leadership that impacts on parental involvement in areas experiencing inequality. What is paramount however is to ensure that what is established as 'effective' is viewed as something susceptible to flux and change, ever dependent on the fusion of a range of elements which contribute to its existence in the first place.

Handy warns against the searching for the prescription and/or prediction for success or the answer to organisational effectiveness. Organisational effectiveness is important to this process in that all

schools are now measured, as part of the whole school evaluation, on parental involvement. If the school is based in an area of designated disadvantage it is also required to identify targets around parental involvement in its 3 year DEIS action plan. If the leadership's commitment to parental involvement emerges from this measurement, it may well impact on their approaches and strategies around it. According to Handy organisations are primarily fascinating collections of people. This is also relevant in the context of this research. People involved in schools come from their own experiences and contexts and join together in working in a specific context with a specific set of political and environmental pressures and constraints and who will all respond and relate in different ways to the experience of the leadership of the organisation. Handy calls on us therefore to use interpretative schemes to clarify organisational dilemmas (Handy, 1999, p. 20) rather than look to the theory for a prescribed answer. In continuing his comparison of organisational theory to the study of history he states

“Scientific observations and the scientific unearthing of facts of organisational behaviour are most important; so is the establishment of any causal sequences that can be traced. But we should not expect such causal sequences to be endlessly repeatable, to hold good for all time, nor should we look to them for a total understanding of organisations and what happens within them.”

(p. 377)

Morgan uses the idea of organisations as metaphors to enable powerful insight into how we think about organisations (Morgan 2006). This however in turn also emphasises that each perspective on an organisation is in some way created at the expense of another. “Metaphor is inherently paradoxical. It can create powerful insights that also become distortions, as the way of seeing created through a metaphor, becomes a way of *not* seeing” (Morgan, 2006 p. 5). Bearing this

distortion in mind, metaphor does however facilitate us to stretch our imaginations when thinking about organisations and how they function and how they operate to be effective. If we recognise theory as metaphor we can see how, as Handy proposed, it is an eclectic mix of theories that we should draw on or as Morgan himself states “that no single theory will ever give us a perfect or all-purpose point of view. We realize that the challenge is to become skilled in the art of using metaphor: to find fresh ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping the situations that we want to organize and manage” (Morgan, 2006 p. 5). “There are no right or wrong theories in management in an absolute sense, for every theory illuminates and hides” (Morgan, 2006 p. 8).

Gunter (2001) promotes an awareness of the political dimension to knowledge production about school effectiveness and leadership. In reviewing the field of school effectiveness, school improvement, education management and critical studies, Gunter draws on Sammons et al (1995) and Teddlie et al (2000) to identify that the focus within school effectiveness research has been on the identification and multilevel measurement of ‘key determinants of school effectiveness in secondary and primary schools and that school effectiveness stakes its rational epistemology of cause and effect connections between what schools do and pupil outcomes’ (Gunter, 2001 p.33). This is the antithesis of taking a more eclectic approach to organisational theory and ‘effectiveness’ and is largely driven by a policy context keen to see results around school improvement. As mentioned in Chapter 1 this research would like to contribute to a re-definition of what the school improvement agenda is, to include value on meaningful parental involvement. This research aims to contribute to the equity and social justice agenda by exploring leadership models in schools that impact at parental involvement level in areas experiencing educational inequality. Given the evidence that already suggests how parental involvement has a wider impact, it could

potentially contribute to an improvement in educational equality in terms of participation and outcome in these areas.

The epistemological concerns, political agendas and power relations which are driving some of the knowledge creation around school reform, outcome based approaches, organisational effectiveness and leadership are all relevant given the context within which this research is being carried out. With that in mind however the literature does provide us with many useful and insightful frameworks to work from when looking to explore and examine leadership and its impact on parental involvement. As Cuban informs us “there are more than 350 definitions of leadership but no clear and unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders” (Cuban 1988, p. 190). There is however a focus on influence in many of the definitions of leadership. “Most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person (or group) over other people (or groups) to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation” (Yukl, 2002 p.3). The inclusion of person or group here emphasises that leadership can be carried out by individuals or groups—this is also advocated by Leithwood (2001) in his advocacy for distributed leadership as an alternative to the more traditional top-down approaches.

Distributed leadership could have much to offer a leadership approach committed to social justice and inclusion. As with leadership there are a number of definitions of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership is a non-hierarchical and inclusive leadership approach that fosters collaborative and ethical practice (Hodgkinson, 1991; Ryan 2004; Starrat, 2004). Gronn (2002) has carried out extensive work in this area and has developed a taxonomy of distributed leadership. This can be broadly identified as 1) ‘the aggregated leadership behaviour of some,

many or all of the members of an organisation or an organisational sub-unit', leadership which is 'dispersed rather than concentrated' and 2) as concertive action, in which distributed leadership is more than the sum of its parts. This is defined as 'the demonstrated or presumed structuring influence attributable to organisation members acting in concert' (p28). Gronn emphasises this element of distributed leadership. For him, central to the idea of distributed leadership is not the agency of individuals but 'structurally constrained conjoint agency, or the concertive labour performed by pluralities of interdependent organisation members' (p.28). Gronn identifies three main elements in concertive action:

- a) Spontaneous collaboration concerning tasks—this involves the leadership being evident in the interaction and relationships in which people with different skills, expertise and from different levels within the organisation (p.5)
- b) Shared role which emerges between two or more people involving close joint working within an implicit framework of understanding (p.6)
- c) Institutionalisation of structures of working together e.g. a committee

Based on Gronn's classification above, it is clear that distributed leadership, if enacted from an intention of inclusion, could contribute to the building of capacity across a school in relation to attaining 'socially just equity goals'. In the context of this research this approach is highly relevant. However, one must be aware of the degree of control and autonomy and within this the scope of dispersed initiative associated with distributed leadership and with the boundaries of participation in terms of who is included in distributed leadership. Some studies have demonstrated how some forms of distributed leadership work with strong leadership at senior level and are restricted by aims and values set by superior levels internal and external to the organisation (Graetz 2000).

Whilst a distributed leadership approach could offer great scope and opportunity to build capacity across schools, until such time as social justice, inclusion and equity goals are part of the measurement of performance at national level, it is unlikely that the distribution of leadership or the tasks pertaining to inclusion will focus on building that capacity albeit that at a theoretical level the model of leadership would facilitate that. In relation to the 'boundaries of participation' which define who is included in distributed leadership, in the case of schools, teacher leadership has been a focus of study and discussion (Leithwood and Jantzi 2000) however there has been little done with regard to non-teaching staff, students and parents (Woods 2011). Given the emphasis within the conceptualisation of distributive leadership on the move away from a single 'heroic' leader to an opening of leadership beyond those in formal leadership positions, it is a promising model in the context of this research.

This research emphasises the importance of intent and underlying value base with which a leadership approaches its leading. A commitment to social justice and aiming to achieve that through inclusive practices underpins the approach. Ryan (2006) however cautions about the conservative concept of inclusion whereby it is viewed simply as a matter of integrating the excluded, marginalised and problematic into the existing system. He identifies that this view is in itself problematic in that it *"does not permit the marginalised to participate because they will not have the resources, tools, or skills to do so, or the means to acquire them. Meaningful inclusion, then, requires that the system change"* (p. 7). Ryan purports that this system change must facilitate the participation of those currently excluded in order that they can shape, contribute and benefit from the systemic change required. The importance and acknowledgement of a requirement for 'co-creation' is discussed further under Freire below. In relation to the system change Munck (2005)

identifies that participants need to see this as an active process where the change is created not from 'without' but from 'within'.

Ryan identifies that leadership is one of the ways in which social justice and inclusion can be addressed. Clearly however not all leadership approaches are fit for this purpose. The traditional management approach is by its very nature hierarchical and omits most people from decision making and its power base. With its narrow focus on efficiency and narrowly defined outcome measures there is little scope for an emphasis on social justice or inclusion (Blackmore 1990; Marshall 2004). Distributed leadership is an approach that could facilitate social justice and inclusive practices if the intent with which it is enacted emphasises social justice, inclusion and equity as one of its main goals and outcomes. In distributing leadership across a school staff and the parent body there is scope to build capacity of those working at different levels. *"For leadership to be genuinely inclusive, it must foster equitable and horizontal relationships that also transcend wider gender, race and class divisions"* (Ryan, 2006, p. 8). A commitment to the development of a distributed leadership approach could potentially act as an antidote to the tendency in schools for the power and decision making to rest with the principal. With its emphasis on moving away from the 'individual hero' and onto the collective and what can be achieved through that, distributed leadership could, with an inclusive intention, offer much to facilitating parental involvement in schools—in terms of an approach, power-sharing and supporting organisational wide capacity building. *"For leadership to be consistent with inclusive ideals, then, it needs to be seen and practiced as an equitable, collective process that is also organised to promote inclusion"* (ibid, p. 9).



Ryan (2010) identifies that researchers in educational administration have only addressed issues of marginalisation for a comparatively short time. Researchers have traditionally addressed issues of those marginalised from the traditions of critical theory, feminism, neo Marxism and post structuralism Bates (1980), Foster (1980). There has been a focus in the most recent social justice leadership literature on the theoretical more than the practical, (MacKinnon 2000, Blackmore 2002, Larson and Murtadha 2002, Shields 2004, Lugg and Soho 2006). Theoharris (2007) is the exception to this in describing a number of strategies used by principals to promote social justice in contexts that are not always supportive of this promotion. Ryan (2010) however identifies that although informative and helpful to practitioners Theoharris does not explore the issue of power relations at school and district level and like other literature that explores the advocacy role of social justice leaders and/or principals does not address the micro-political nature of this work. The power and micro-political elements are highly relevant for this research process as is establishing the commitment to a social justice, inclusive and equitable approach from the leadership as part of the data collection. Establishing the values and any associated actions for the schools to ensure the attainment of equity goals will form part of the research process.

Malen and Cochran (2008) identify that while studies refer to power and leadership at school level they do not describe the dynamics of micro political relationships. When they do, it is often from a critical perspective e.g. the description of how powerful school administrators exert their will over less powerful parents and teachers. Leithwood et al (1999) and Malen and Cochran (2008) in their studies acknowledge the on-going power of the principal in such relationships but identify that interactions may be amicable. Gronn's and Eacott's call for studies with the capacity to synthesise a focus on both individual(s) **and** structural

elements may facilitate a more in depth understanding here and may facilitate what Ryan calls for in identifying studies that explore the positive side of the politics of leadership. Ryan (2010) identifies that research examining micro political activity designed to promote social justice is non-existent. He proposes however that pursuers of social justice may have to engage in micro-politics and view it, like Anderson (1991), Marshall and Scribner (1991), Lindle (1994) and McGinn (2005), as a positive thing.

Ryan's (2010) own study explored the political acumen possessed by principals who identified themselves as pursuing inclusion, social justice and equity goals. It describes the manner in which social justice minded principals employed political acumen to achieve their goals. Ryan outlines that in relation to the principals who participated "also understood that promoting social justice went hand in hand with ensuring the equitable treatment of marginalised groups, that is, they acknowledged that disenfranchised groups could not be treated in the same manner as privileged groups" (Ryan and Rottman 2007). In order to achieve such ends, many of these Principals also favoured the idea and practice of inclusion. They did what they could to include members of their school communities –students, parents, teachers and others—in decision making processes and activities in ways that provided them with the power that they often did not possess in other contexts. They saw inclusion not as mere tokenism, but as a way for the marginalised to have a meaningful voice (Ryan 2006).

Ryan contends that if principals are to succeed in their social justice endeavours then they have little choice but to play the political game, that is to acknowledge the political realities of their organisations, hone their political skills and put their skills into play. If they fail to do this it does not bode well for the future of equity and social justice (Ryan 2010).

The role of power and micro politics is an important element of the context of this research study. It is why a focus on purely democratic leadership may be insufficient for this discussion. A democratic ethos while promoting a respect for consultation and the right for individuals to speak their minds (Trafford 2003) may not explicitly deal with the power imbalance or the micro politics at play which may prevent the more marginalised and/or less powerful from involvement/participation. To create an ethos where everyone has the right to be involved/participate does not actively address the entrenched inequalities that exist in the communities where this research takes place.

Given the socio economic situation in the areas where both schools are situated, the trend towards a school reform agenda focus of the existing literature on parental involvement and to some extent educational leadership, the researcher's own value position and the wish for this process to contribute to some change in both levels of parental involvement and leadership approaches to it, there was a focus on reviewing literature on Freirian philosophy and theory, social justice and equality theory. From this researcher's perspective these all contribute to the framing and designing of the research purpose, questions and to how the knowledge created through this process can be thought about.

## **Freire**

Freire (1970) posited that those who are "oppressed" must actively and purposively be a part of their gaining freedom as must those who are acting as the "oppressor". To those who might say a path is already defined by social and historical contexts Freire argued against accepting history as 'determinism' and identified that he embraced history and possibility (Freire and Macedo, 2002).

In discussing 'leadership training' within Communities where oppression exists, Freire cautions against a now commonly used and according to Freire 'naïve' assumption that if you focus on the leaders within a Community you can then develop the Community by training its leaders, "as if it were the parts that promote the whole and not the whole which, in being promoted, promotes the parts" (p 142). In the school context 'a critical mass of parents' has often been identified as the group to work with or to develop or to share workload. According to Freire's thinking this is separating the parts from the whole in a way that will not lead to sustained, meaningful or authentic transformation or cultural action. Freire discusses identifying key individuals within a Community, those that are in harmony with living and thinking about the reality around them and once they are 'trained up' and return to their Communities with resources they did not formerly have they either use these resources to control or they become strangers in their own communities and their former leadership position is thus threatened (p 142). Freire's affirmation of humankind as beings of praxis, differing from animals, which are beings of pure activity, is key here (p 125). According to Freire it is absolutely essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as Subjects of the transformation.

*"When cultural action, as a totalized and totalizing process, approaches an entire community and not merely its leaders, the opposite process occurs. Either the former leaders grow along with everyone else, or they are replaced by new leaders who emerge as a result of a new social consciousness of the community." (p143)*

Freire identifies that it is a critical and liberating dialogue that is required to be carried out with the oppressed. This dialogue which according to Freire presupposes action must also include reflection. The fusion of reflection and action, and not activism (action without reflection), is praxis. This praxis requires a trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. If this trust does not exist there will be no dialogue, reflection or communication initiated or once it is and if trust is lost it will be abandoned. Freire stresses the importance of an authentic view of the world, one which involves awareness on the part of the oppressor and the oppressed of the reality. It is only when this begins that the oppressed will cease fatalistically 'accepting' their exploitation as the way that it is. He talks of the emotional dependence of the oppressed which can lead to the destruction of life—their own and that of their oppressed fellows (p 65).

*"Political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the word, and, therefore action with the oppressed. Those who work for liberation must not take advantage of the emotional dependence of the oppressed—dependence that is the fruit of the concrete situation of domination which surrounds them and which engendered their unauthentic view of the world."*  
(p66)

The recognition of this dependence must be identified as a weak point and through reflection and action transformed into independence. Freire proposes that "not even the best-intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift". Liberation and transformation will be achieved, according to Freire, through a conscious, authentic, reflective dialogue. Freire (1970) speaks of a revolutionary leadership needing to practice a 'co-intentional education'

*“Leadership and people, co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement.” (p69)*

### **Equality, equity and social justice**

Lynch and Lodge (2002) identified that often in studies relating to equality in education the definition of equality or inequality is not made explicit. They also stress the importance of drawing on other disciplines to enhance insight. In their study they draw particularly on political theory, radical Marxist inspired and feminist critical thinkers, in establishing an egalitarian framework for their work. Their framework of four major generative roots of inequality which they established through engaging in dialogue with egalitarian theory is part of what underpins this research study. They identify these as separate but inter-related challenges for those interested in social change. Inequality is a distributive problem (patterns of ownership, control, distribution, opportunities and consumption). Inequality is a recognition problem (culturally based systems of recognition, non-recognition and misrecognition, status-related inequalities i.e. those arising from sexuality, religion, beliefs, ethnicity). Inequality is a representational problem (in contexts where power is enacted, in realms of decision making, in systems of inclusion/exclusion in the exercise of power). Inequality is an affective matter (relations of dependency and

interdependency, human beings are not just rational actors; they are also affective agents in social & political life).

The data collected in this research process will explore parental involvement in relation to the four areas and will identify how further studies could be framed in order to progress knowledge in the area. Lynch and Lodge have acknowledged that inequality can be a fusion of all four of these generative roots i.e. distributive, recognition, representational and affective domains. Also relevant for this research process is their identification of how the equality debate in education has focused primarily on creating equality of opportunity. This limiting approach derives from the lack of interaction and critical dialogue with radical egalitarian theorists about the equal opportunities policies that were developed. The focus of identifying progress in relation to equality in education has traditionally been by attempting to ensure that 'marginalised groups' or 'disadvantaged groups' have increasing access to universities or high status jobs. Lynch (1999) identifies that a 'conservatising' effect on public policy can occur from this focus, as the inherent structural inequalities endemic to hierarchies of knowledge, jobs etc. are not subject to inquiry. Lynch and Lodge advocate strongly for a multi-disciplinary dialogue in relation to equality citing that the gain for critical sociologists would be that

*“they would have access to conceptual frameworks that would enhance their sociological insights regarding the futility of trying to promote equality of opportunity without equality of condition. Radical egalitarian theory underlines the impossibility of exercising civil and political rights without having social and economic rights protected.” (p 8)*

Lynch and Lodge (2002) identify inequality as a social phenomena that must be understood in terms of its 3 interrelated realities. *“It has an*

*objective dimension in the sense that it can be observed by those outside of those experiencing it, it has a subjectively situated meaning for those who live with it and who know it experientially and it has an ethically situated meaning in that it can be assessed as creating greater or lesser injustice” (p16).*

## **Power**

Power can be defined as the ability to cause or prevent an action; to make things happen; the discretion to act or not act. Power can also be the ability to determine the behaviour of others or to decide the outcome of conflict, Bush (2003). One can distinguish between authority and influence in discussing sources of power. Authority gives an individual or a group of people the legal right to make decisions. Influence, is the capacity and ability to affect the behaviours of others and to affect outcomes. Authority is a structural, legal element of power and influence depends more on personal charisma, characteristics and areas of expertise. Power, authority and influence are potential or actual in that if they are not exercised they will not affect behaviour and action. Influence could be defined as activated power. For example authority refers to the acceptance by an individual or group of another's right to affect her/his behaviour and action. Despite possible consequences the final determination of an individual's behaviour lies with the individual themselves. Although he/she may be forced into apparent compliance full co-operation or commitment could be withheld. At the most extreme an individual may conspire to do all he/she can do to prevent the intended outcome. It could be argued therefore that the authority resides in the receiver in that they decide whether to accept it or not (Ribbins, 2007). This proposal is an interesting one to think about in relation to the dynamic of the parents and the principal for example and how power and its elements of authority and influence impact the leadership of parental involvement. From a policy and statutory structural perspective



the role of parents in the partnership process of decision making is embedded. These formal structures have not however succeeded in securing a parental voice (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2003b). Part of what this research seeks to explore is if the policy requirements at least provide a platform for meaningful power sharing in a formalised structured way?

The researcher cannot discuss power in the context of this research without identifying the existing potential for inequality. As identified the research is being carried out in areas 'designated as disadvantage'. The two schools involved in this research are categorised as DEIS Urban Band 1 schools based on the socio-economic data they provided to the DES. This means they receive the maximum amount of additional supports offered from the Department. Power distance is a way to explain the handling of differences between groups existing in a system of inequality. It reflects a culture's attitude towards human inequality which defines itself inside organizations through a manager subordinate relationship. Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and/or institutions (like family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Low power distance cultures accept and expect power relations that are consultative or democratic. People relate to one another more as equals regardless of formal positions. Those in the lower position in terms of the hierarchy are comfortable with and expect the right to contribute and critique the decision making of those in power. High power distance cultures accept power relations as autocratic and paternalistic. Power is acknowledged simply based on where individuals are situated in certain formal hierarchical positions.

Given the formal hierarchical nature of the Education system and the identity of the 'professional' situated within the school system, it is perhaps understandable that teachers and parents may have come to

accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Given also the school based and school centered focus of the parental involvement elements of policy and the subsequent strategies employed it could be argued that there has been little scope to date to hear from those ‘uninvolved’ about how they may become involved. Bush (2003) identifies the *authority of expertise* as one of his ‘six significant forms of power relevant to schools and colleges’ (p 98). Handy (1993, p130) identifies that in a meritocratic tradition people do not resent being influenced by those whom they regard as the experts. “The expert” often carries an aura of authority and power that can add considerable weight to a decision that rests in the balance (Morgan, 1997, p181). This is interesting to think about in the context of this research study. Teachers can be perceived as the experts in matters of pedagogy, curriculum and successful navigation of the school system. The school system is a middle class system. Where does the expertise for the communities, values, philosophies and positions of the children and families attending a DEIS Band 1 school come from? Is there an expertise in that regard located in parents, that needs to be drawn on? How can that occur in an atmosphere of co-intentional education of dialogue, of critical reflection as proposed by Freire?

The cultural aspects of power and leadership must also be identified in the context of this study. In discussing this Bush (2003) states

*“Cultural models assume that beliefs, values and ideology are at the heart of organisations. Individuals hold certain ideas and value-preferences which influence how they behave and how they view the behaviour of other members. These norms become shared traditions which are communicated within the groups and are reinforced by symbols and ritual.”* (p 156)

Bush highlights that societal culture is one important aspect of the context within which school leaders must operate. The interface between

the community culture surrounding the school and the organisational culture of the school is relevant in considering this research. Dimmock and Walker (2002) identify power-distributed/power concentrated as one of their seven 'dimensions' of societal culture. The level to which power is either distributed equally or whether it is more concentrated among a few and who those few are must be considered as part of this research.

Whitty, Halpin and Power (1995) identify that during the 1990s as the strong accountability requirements of outcomes based education continued to increase and develop, educational inequality was intensified. Discourses of choice, competition and accountability supplanted those of equity, comprehensiveness and co-operation. Blackmore (2006) highlights that schools, assumed to be consensus-driven coherent units rather than sites of contestation over power and values and socially constructed by gender, race and class, were de-contextualised from external influences and constraint Blackmore identifies that the field of theory and practice in educational administration and leadership has been more reactive than proactive with regard to social justices, yet held responsible for what they could not control. Mediating the politics of choice and equity is the predicament now facing both theorists and practitioners according to Blackmore. According to her, choice as a mechanism to distribute schooling does not deliver equity because of the unequal capacities of the majority to have the same range of choices as the minority. She cautions about the mainstream theory's lack of theoretical frames and language of social justice to address the inequity due to its disposition towards managerial accountability, principal-focused leadership, universalising best practice and de-professionalisation through standards driven reform. Blackmore calls for the deliberative democracy proposed by critical and feminist scholars which can sustain the conditions that encourage dialogue, deliberation and talk rather than the 'thin'

democracy of markets and managerialism. This means addressing the imbalances of power within schools in order to pursue greater agency for all stakeholders (students and parents). She queries, what if social justice becomes the purpose of leadership?

This Literature Review highlights the complexities and implied sensitivities involved in a study regarding parental involvement particularly one with an emphasis on the leading of this 'parental involvement', in the context of areas consistently experiencing educational inequality. In the light of the literature review the researcher committed to ensuring that the method of inquiry would facilitate further understanding about the parental involvement in areas experiencing educational inequality and to illuminate a leadership construct that would reflectively and then actively co-create the conditions to secure this involvement. The importance of the capacity of the leadership to adopt a fluid value based leadership approach drawing on the wide range of leadership literature which would include a commitment to issues of social justice, inclusion and equity emerged. The importance and necessity of parents being reflective and active participants in any change process is evident. The necessity to interrogate and potentially extend and redefine the school reform agenda, which has laid the foundations for the little research that has been carried out in this area in Ireland to date has impacted on the research process.

## **Chapter 3 Research approach**

### **Introduction**

In Chapter 1 the research rationale and the local, national and international contexts were established. The literature review identified and discussed the existing evidence base and research approaches in relation to parental involvement. It highlighted the paucity of research that currently exists in relation to parental involvement in areas of designated disadvantaged and in relation to the leading of parental involvement more generally. It reviewed leadership literature identifying the importance of a 'fluid' approach to leadership and discussed elements relating to social justice, equity and participative change. This Chapter describes and discusses the approach taken to this research. It identifies the three pillars on which the research methodology rests and the epistemological and ontological approaches inherent in this process. It also includes a comprehensive description and discussion of the methodology and methods used.

### **Research purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore and examine parental involvement in two urban primary schools with an emphasis on the 'leading' of this parental involvement. Both schools are in areas designated as having high levels of social and economic disadvantage by the Department of Education and Science.

Following the Literature Review the following aims were established in order to progress the research purpose in the Irish context.

## **Research aims**

The aims of this research are:

- To explore the commitment to and actual levels of engagement of parents as partners within each of the schools
- To determine what constitutes parental involvement in the two schools
- To explore and examine the leadership approaches operating within the two schools in relation to parental involvement
- To establish the relevance and use of best practice in engaging the parents and informing the work generally with the parents in the schools.

## **The theoretical framework**

Ontology is concerned with matters relating to reality and truth. Blaike (1993) identifies ontology as the study of 'claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other'. Ontology describes our view on the nature of reality and whether an objective reality exists or whether it is more a subjective reality based on our experiences and perception of those experiences. The ontological perspective of this research is one that supports the view that there are different and multiple realities shared by groups and that 'reality' and truth are products of individual perception. As a critical emancipatory study this research also operates from the ontological assumption that social reality is socially constructed through institutions, media and society and that social behaviour is the "outcome of particular illegitimate, domatory and repressive factors, illegitimate in the sense that they do not operate in general interest-one person's or group's freedom and power is bought at the price of another's freedom

and power” (Cohen et al, 2007, p26). This research is specifically influenced by Freire’s ontological argument about the nature of thought and being. He posits that one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity. Neither can exist without the other, nor can they be dichotomised.

“To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people. The objectivistic position is as ingenuous as that of subjectivism, which postulates people without a world. World and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction.”

(Freire, 1970, p 50)

Philosophically Freire did see an objective world outside of our consciousness, but he recognised that this was a world that we learn about through our subjective lenses as human beings (Roberts, 2003).

Epistemology is concerned with the nature, sources and limits of knowledge. The epistemology approach underlying this research is one that identifies knowledge as subjective, based on experience and insight. As a critical theory study, the epistemological assumptions are that knowledge is socially constructed through institutions, media and society. “What counts as worthwhile knowledge is determined by the social and positional power of the advocates of that knowledge” (Cohen, Mannion et al, 2007, p 27). However, again the epistemological assumptions are also influenced by Freire. Freire (Davis & Freire, 1981) explains his dialectical materialist epistemology under the concept of conscientização, where he explains that,

“Only when we understand the 'dialecticity' between consciousness and the world - that is, when we know that we don't have a consciousness here and the world there but, on the contrary, when both of them, the objectivity and the subjectivity, are incarnating dialectically, is it possible to understand what conscientização is, and to understand the role of consciousness in the liberation of humanity.” (p. 62)

Freire recognizes that because humans are part of the world, and that because our consciousness comes from dialectical interaction with that world, other humans included, ultimately our consciousness is first and foremost a social consciousness (Freire & Macedo, 1987, 1995; Roberts, 2003).

According to Freire (1982), "Subjects cannot think alone" and he identifies that there "is no longer an 'I think' but 'we think'" (p. 137). Freire unites these conceptualisations to find that, because we are in constant, dialectical, critical reflection with the material and social worlds, and because as humans we have the capacity to act with volition on our critical reflection to change those worlds, we are not totally "determined beings" since we can "reflect critically about conditioning process and go beyond it" (Freire, 1998, p. 20). This process of human critical reflection on the world and taking conscious, transformative action on that world is how Freire conceives of "praxis" (Davis & Freire, 1981; Freire, 1974, 1982a, 1982), which is the core of his epistemology. Freire (1982) explains that,



“Human beings ... are beings of 'praxis': of action and of reflection. Humans find themselves marked by the results of their own actions in their relations with the world, and through the action on it. By acting they transform; by transforming they create a reality which conditions their manner of acting.” (p. 102)

Freire is also committed to a dialectical epistemology that asserts that we can know things as integrated totalities (Roberts, 2003) and that we learn through a dialectical process of breaking things down into parts and "retotalizing" them yet again (P. Freire, 1974; P. Freire & Macedo, 1995; Shor & Freire, 1987). He states that:

“What we do when we try to establish a cognitive or epistemological relationship with the object to be known, when we get it into our hands, grasp it, and begin to ask ourselves about it, what we really begin to do is to take it as a *totality*. We then begin to split it into its constituent parts ... In a certain moment, even though we may not have exhausted the process of splitting the object, we try to understand it now in its totality. We try to *retotalize* the totality which we split! ... The moment of summarizing has to do with this effort of retotalizing of the totality we divided into parts.” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 161)

Additionally, Freire's epistemology frames knowledge as always changing, always developing, as humans seek out causality and critically analyze that same causality in order to improve their epistemological grasp of something (P. Freire, 1982a, 1982b; Roberts, 2003).

The research design is underpinned by three pillars i.e. Freirian philosophy and theory and Community Development principles, Lynch

and Lodge's egalitarian framework and Epstein's spheres of overlapping influence and model of six types of parental involvement in schools.

### **Critical Theory**

The research is approached from a critical theory perspective and using a case study methodology. A "critical" theory may be distinguished from a "traditional" theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation, "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer 1982, 244). Part of the rationale for taking this approach is to recognise the social, socio-economic, cultural and educational contexts in which the study is being carried out. This study, as a critical theory study, seeks to identify and explain what is wrong with the current social reality, identify the actors that can change it and provide clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (James Bohman, 2010). Based on Ribbins and Gunter's (2002) 'Knowledge Provinces', both critical research and axiological research are relevant knowledge domains for categorising this research. Ribbins and Gunter identify critical research as that concerned with revealing and emancipating practitioners from various forms of social injustice and oppression of established but unjustifiable structures and processes of power. They identify axiological research with a focus on clarifying values to identify and support epistemologically what is right and ontologically what is good. This is relevant for this research project given the focus of the knowledge creation on the substantive issue largely emerging from the school reform agenda and an apparent lack of interrogation of that agenda in terms of the power imbalance integral to those involved in it.

## **Pillar 1**

### **Freire and Community Development principles**

#### **Freire**

As identified and discussed in the Literature review chapter, Freire advocates for the oppressed to liberate both themselves and the oppressor by creating a new dialogue and by engaging in reflection and then action in order to transform (praxis). Freire's theory and philosophy has much to offer the thinking around this research process. How do schools view the parents' involvement and non-involvement? Is there scope for the parents to actively and purposefully create change? Can a change be parent-led? The research does not wish to advocate for a naïve view of parental involvement divorced from existing local and national structures, policy demands and evaluation measures. However, to facilitate and secure meaningful 'parental involvement' particularly in these areas, we need to reflect on the challenge a Freireian slant puts on this:

“In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit but as a limiting situation which can transform. This perception is necessary but not sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action”.

(Freire, 1970, p49)

If the researcher were to use this theory in the context of this research study, she would propose that 'those parents that are currently uninvolved in the school need to be involved in their becoming uninvolved'.

Freire (1970) calls for *co-intentional* education with both the leadership and people *co-intent* on reality, both Subjects, who need to engage

actively and reflectively in 'knowing' their reality and then by on-going action and reflection will critically recreate this knowledge. In applying this philosophy to the context of this research it could be argued that the school staff and leadership will be required to identify and reflect on their own position within the dynamic of parental involvement in the school. The parents themselves in 'becoming involved in their becoming uninvolved' will be required to engage in a dialogue with the school staff and leadership to jointly create a 'co-intentional partnership' for the benefit of children's learning in the school community.

### **Community development principles**

Community development seeks to empower individuals and groups of people by providing these groups with the skills they need to affect change in their own communities. Community developers must understand both how to work with individuals and how to affect communities' positions within the context of larger social institutions.

Community Development Exchange ([www.cdx.org.uk](http://www.cdx.org.uk)) defines community development as

*"both an occupation (such as a community development worker in a local authority) and a way of working with communities. Its key purpose is to build communities based on justice, equality and mutual respect."*

In the context of this research it is the way of working that is most relevant.

*"Community development involves changing the relationships between ordinary people and people in positions of power, so that everyone can take part in the issues that affect their lives. It starts from the principle that within any community there is a wealth of knowledge and experience*

*which, if used in creative ways, can be channeled into collective action to achieve the communities' desired goals."*

The Community Development Foundation (2006) refers to the challenge of defining Community Development. It identifies the assumption of Community being a fixed entity and that the aim is to develop it as such. It defines Community as a group of people with some important characteristics or concerns and a network of relationships which endure over a long period. It is identified that these same people also have other relationships and networks and belong to other communities and it is not the purpose of Community Development to limit this essential freedom and fluidity. In the context of this research this could facilitate the community of parents and the community of school staff to identify themselves within their own 'school community' sharing concerns and characteristics in relation to the children's school experience and learning and developing a network of relationships with each other usually over an eight year period. In terms of taking a Freirian philosophy this research does not propose that these 'communities' be viewed in isolation but rather as part of a totality, a learning community within the education system within the whole of our society. Freire (1970) warns of the potential danger of fragmenting parts of the whole not least in removing the potential for critical thinking as one "focuses on problematic groups or areas rather than as dimensions of a totality" (p141) and also in its potential to compound a feeling of alienation.

One of the key elements of Community Development within this research context is that as a way of working it is underpinned by a specific set of values. Those engaged in Community Development practices agree to work towards these values e.g. Community Development Exchange require all of its members to ascribe to the following values:

**Equality and Anti-discrimination**

Community development practice challenges structural inequalities and discriminatory practices. Community development recognises that people are not the same, but they are all of equal worth and importance and therefore entitled to the same degree of respect and acknowledgement.

**Social Justice**

The aim of increasing social justice is an essential element of community development practice. It involves identifying and seeking to alleviate structural disadvantage and advocating strategies for overcoming exclusion, discrimination and inequality.

**Collective Action**

Community development practice is essentially about working with and supporting groups of people, to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence so they can analyse their situations and identify issues which can be addressed through collective action.

**Community Empowerment**

Community development practice seeks the empowerment of individuals and communities, through using the strengths of the community to bring about desired changes.

**Working and Learning Together**

Community development practice promotes a collective process which enables participants to learn from reflecting on their experiences.

Community development practitioners work alongside people in communities to help build relationships with key people and organizations and to identify common concerns. They create opportunities for the community to learn new skills and, by enabling people to act together, community development practitioners help to foster social inclusion and equality.

Community development which specialises in encouraging and empowering people to gain control over the conditions in which they live gives us a very powerful way of turning alienation into engagement (Community Development Exchange, [www.cdx.org.uk](http://www.cdx.org.uk)) .

## Pillar 2

### Lynch and Lodge's egalitarian framework

Lynch and Lodge's framework of four major generative roots of inequality which they established through engaging in dialogue with egalitarian theory is part of what underpins this research study.

They identify these as separate but inter-related challenges for those interested in social change.

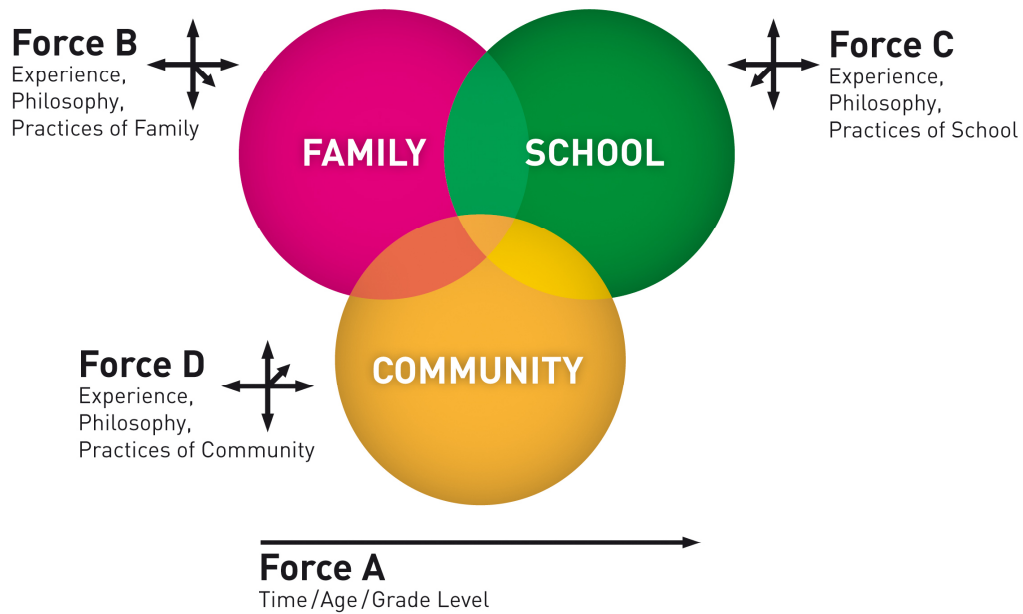
Source of inequality	Source of inequality	Source of inequality	Source of inequality
<b>Distribution</b>	<b>Recognition</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>Affective</b>
Patterns of ownership, control, distribution, opportunities and consumption	Culturally based systems of recognition, non-recognition and misrecognition, status-related inequalities i.e. those arising from sexuality, religion, beliefs, ethnicity	In contexts where power is enacted, in realms of decision making, in systems of inclusion/exclusion in the exercise of power	Relations of dependency and interdependency, human beings are not just rational actors; they are also affective agents in social & political life
Link to Parental Involvement  Legislative framework for opportunities to participate in school system as a parent i.e. Parents Association and BOM (links to recognition and representation)	Link to Parental Involvement  Legislative recognition in terms of the 'right' to be involved  Gender recognition on formal representative structures i.e. one female, one male	Link to Parental Involvement  Legislative framework for how parents are to be involved in decision making i.e. policy development, Parents Association and BOM	Link to Parental Involvement  In areas of designated disadvantage emphasis placed on relationship building and connection with home and what might be occurring in the home through

			<p>the HSCL role.</p> <p>The affective domain impacts on all of the other three roots—if there are issues of confidence, anger, emotional difficulties it could impact on a parent’s and school staff’s capacity to engage at these levels.</p>
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### **Model of Parental Involvement**

This research design is also underpinned by Epstein’s model of overlapping spheres of influence and her model of 6 types of Parental Involvement.





**Fig 1: Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence**

Type 1	Parenting
Type 2	Communicating
Type 3	Volunteering
Type 4	Learning at home
Type 5	Decision making
Type 6	Collaborating with the Community

**Fig 2: Epstein's Framework of 6 types of Parental Involvement**

The 'overlapping spheres of influence' and the '6 types of Parental Involvement' have both have been informed by Epstein's research work in the area of parental involvement over twenty five years. Having applied these models over a five year period Epstein subsequently identified

through data collected that progress on partnerships are more likely when there are eight essential elements i.e. strong leadership, good teamwork, annual written plans, well-implemented activities, adequate funding, thoughtful evaluations, strong collegial support and continuous planning for improvement. Epstein et al (2002) has provided redefinitions of the areas of involvement to facilitate successful design and implementation of the six types of involvement e.g. Type 4, Learning at Home, “Homework” to mean not only work done alone, but also interactive activities shared with others at home or in the community, linking schoolwork to real life. “Help” at home to mean encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing-not “teaching” school subjects.

Frierian philosophy and Community Development principles are at the core of the research stance, approach and overall design. They informed the design of the data collection tools and they will also both be used to interrogate and reflect on the data collected. They articulate the value system of the researcher engaging in the research approach. Lynch and Lodge’s egalitarian framework also informed the conceptual framework underpinning the research approach and will be used as part of the tools of analysis. Epstein’s models regarding parental involvement and the spheres of overlapping influence informed more specifically the data collection tools that were developed, in terms of the thematic areas explored with the participants and also the selection of interview questions.

## **Case Study Approach**

### **Definition of Case Study**

A case study approach has been used for this research project. Case study is a form of inquiry usually employed by those engaging in qualitative or interpretive inquiry. There are a number of definitions of case study. Yin defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1984, p. 23). Case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg, 1991). Both Denzin & Lincoln (2000) and Yin (1994) emphasize that case study is a research strategy and should not be reduced to being described as a method.

The common characteristics across all the definitions of case study (Denzin & Lincoln (2000); Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg, (1991) and Yin (1984, 1994)) appears to be a huge weighting on 'context' and the recognition that context is a powerful determinant of cause and effect, the capacity within case study analysis to provide understanding for how ideas and more abstract principles work side by side and the capacity to work within the complexities of 'real life' situations.

### **Classification of Case Studies**

Case studies have been classified in different ways in terms of the intent behind the study in question, for example: Yin (1984, 1993) identifies three types, *Exploratory* (as a precursor to other studies or research enquiry), *Explanatory* (to test theories), and *Descriptive* (to provide a narrative account). Merriam (1988) also identifies three types, *Descriptive*, *Interpretive* (inductive categorisation in examining initial

assumptions), and *Evaluative* (examining, explaining and judging). Stake (1995) included three others: *Intrinsic* – in order to understand the particular case in question; *Instrumental* - when the case is used to gain an insight and understanding into an issue or a theory; *Collective* - when a group of cases is studied to gain a fuller picture. In all of the above types of case studies, there can be single-case or multiple-case applications. For the purposes of this research project Merriam's classification of case study is used with the focus on the evaluative.

In case study research, selecting cases must be done so as to maximize what can be learned in the period of time available for the study. Case study research is not sampling research however—this is asserted by all the key case study researchers e.g. Yin, Stake, Feagin. In terms of selecting the information to include in the final report, case study can highlight infrequent, unrepresentative but critical incidents or events that occur which are vital in terms of *understanding* the case. Due to the fact that they do not have to seek statistical frequencies of occurrences case studies can separate the significant few from the insignificant many instances of behaviour. This offers the researcher and the reader an insight into the real dynamics of situations and people.

### **Strengths and limitations of Case Study**

The strength of case studies is the access to their findings by a wide range of readers. Case studies are based in real life situations and provide the opportunity for insights into other similar situations. A researcher working alone has the capacity to carry out a case study and they can work with unanticipated events and uncontrolled variables. Case studies also comprise multi-perspective analyses. This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between

them. This one aspect is a prominent characteristic that case studies possess.

Critics of the case study inquiry or case study as a research strategy believe that the study of a small number of cases can offer no grounds for establishing reliability or generality of findings. It could be argued however that if this was the main purpose of your inquiry it is unlikely that you would select solely a case study method. It is a frequent criticism of case study research that the results are not widely applicable in real life. Yin in particular refuted that criticism by identifying a difference between analytic generalisation and statistical generalisation. Stake (1995) argued for a more intuitive, empirically-grounded generalisation. He termed it "naturalistic" generalisation. His argument was based on the relationship between the reader's experiences and the case study itself. He believed that a cross section of readers would relate and/or identify experientially with the data generated by case studies, thereby facilitating a greater understanding of the phenomenon. Other criticisms of case study focus on the transparency around the selection of information used by the author and the criteria employed to do this, the potential for observer and/or author bias and subjectivity. Although some of this is specific to case study, these arguments also clearly form part of the on-going debate between those advocating positivistic approaches to inquiry and those who favour the interpretive tradition.

### **Why Case Study for this research?**

A case study approach was chosen as it has the capacity to work within and reflect context. A case study approach facilitates the researcher and the reader to take account of issues of resources, historical, cultural and social contexts of situations, personalities and character. Case study has been identified as a methodological approach that can give a voice to

the voiceless (Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg, 1991). It was initially thought that there would be a 'co-operative inquiry' approach to this research. The idea of research 'with' rather than 'on' participants and the capacity to include them as co-researchers had much appeal. Following a pilot project, initial discussions with one of the schools involved, observation of the existing parent-school dynamic, the researcher's position within the research process and the timeframe and scope of the research study the researcher decided that a meaningful and genuine 'co-operative inquiry' may well be something that could follow this research process but it would not be possible for this research study. This was primarily due to an apparently high power distance and a question about whether the parents as participants would really feel they had the opportunity to make decisions. With a longer time frame and a different position as researcher it may have been possible to work through some of this as part of the inquiry. Given the actual situation it was decided that a case study approach would be the best suited and could accommodate the power distance, context and teaching staff's and parents' feelings as part of the inquiry.

Stake (1995) is of the view that knowledge learned from case study is a) more concrete, vivid and sensory than abstract b) more contextual, our experiences are rooted in context, as is knowledge in case studies c) more developed by reader interpretation, readers bring to a case study their own experience and understanding, which lead to generalisations when new data for the case are added to old data.

Yin (1994, p9) suggests that for 'how' and 'why' questions the case study has a distinct advantage. This research does not seek to primarily generate universal truths or easily transferable generalisations. The purpose of this research is to explore a substantive issue that to date has been rarely accessed and researched and to seek to understand and

explain the dynamics surrounding parental involvement in schools and the 'leading' of it, all within its context. Following the literature review and the methodological literature review the researcher did for a time consider that due to the paucity of literature regarding leadership and parental involvement that perhaps the research should be classified more under Yin's exploratory case study rather than Merriam's evaluative type. The intention behind this case study is to describe, explain and ultimately judge. The critical stance of this research contributes to Merriam's evaluative category being the more relevant. Guba and Lincoln (1981) identify that in their view case study is the best reporting form for evaluations because it provides thick description, is grounded, is holistic and lifelike, simplifies data to be considered by the reader, illuminates meanings and can communicate tacit knowledge. This type of case study weighs "information to produce judgement. Judging is the final and ultimate act of evaluation" (p375).

This case study research focuses on parental involvement in schools with an emphasis on the leading of that involvement. It is a comparative case study with research being carried out in two schools. Stake (1995), in identifying when a phenomena can be identified as a case, states that it must be one among others. The case is a specific, complex, functioning thing (p2). The unit of analysis is a critical factor in the case study. It is typically a system of action rather than an individual or group of individuals. Case studies tend to be selective, focusing on one or two issues that are fundamental to understanding the system being examined.

The type of knowledge that was sought through this research process is also important to identify. Eacott (2010) in discussing Educational Leadership identifies that

*“conventional methods of inquiry which focus on identifying and measuring the frequency of specific behaviours without recognising the social space which those actions take place can never provide us with the answer to what it is that educational leaders do. They may provide a countless list of the bodily movements of leaders but they will never get to a level of conceptual understanding that can potentially shape future practice and inquiry in the field”. p268/269*

English (2006), advocating for the use of life writing as a method in progressing our understanding of leadership states

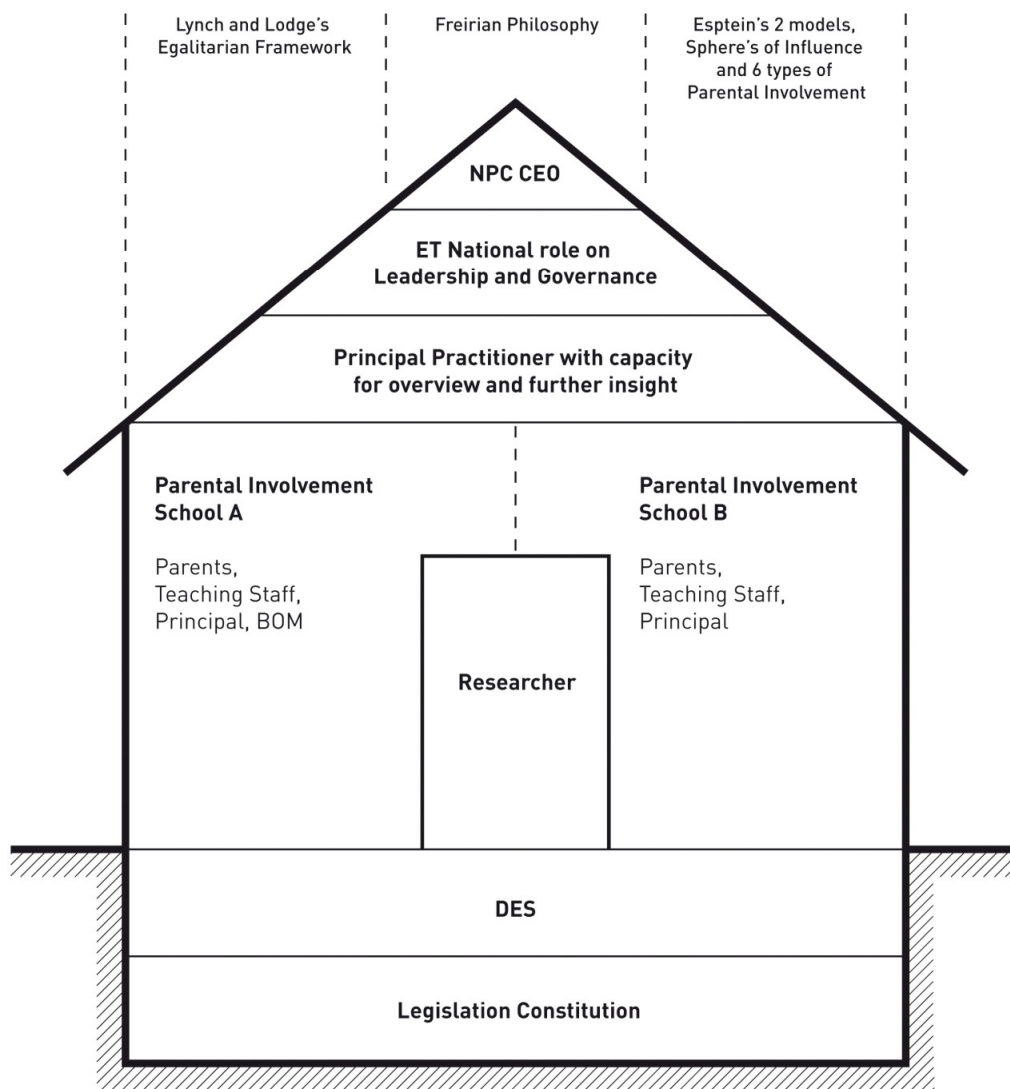
*“While behavioural/ structural variables exercise a parsimonious hold for a so-called ‘objective’ analysis, the serious researcher of leadership comes to recognize that all situations and outcomes are polyvalent; that is they have many meanings that are open to multiple interpretations. Understanding leadership involves more than a simple calculus of behaviours or results of recurrent themes based on surveys. They are too limited to provide much more than a mechanical narrative, however statistically accurate or patterned.” p143*

A range of approaches supported the development of the Case Study approach/strategy for this research. The graphic below outlines a visual conception of the case study metaphor. This case study approach had a number steps to it:

- ❖ Identify research purpose, philosophical framework and foundation pillars
- ❖ Articulate research purpose in this context
- ❖ Identify research sites and key participants
- ❖ Source existing relevant data and commence review. Sourcing and review on-going throughout case study data collection.



- ❖ Establish access and gain agreement from participants in decision making roles
- ❖ Develop research tools to enable access and participation of all participants
- ❖ Commence data collection
- ❖ Commence data analysis and facilitate initial analysis to feed into further data collection
- ❖ Data collection
- ❖ Data analysis—extract themes from level 1 data collection to contribute to designing tools for level 2 data collection and to inform the discussion at these interviews
- ❖ Level 2 data collection
- ❖ Data analysis
- ❖ Conclusions, evaluation and recommendations
- ❖ Identify and explain what is wrong with the current social reality, identify the actors that can change it and provide clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation



**FIG 3:** Case study metaphor

### **Data collection methods and instruments**

Merriam (1998) identifies that the uniqueness of a case study lies not so much in the methods employed (although these are important) as in the questions asked and their relationship to the end product. The methods used in this research were Questerviews (Adamson, Gooberman-Hill, Woolhead, Donovan, 2004; Mulcahy 2006), Observation, Semi structured interviews and a review of existing documents by the researcher (p31). The Questerviews were used as a method to maximise parental involvement in this research process. Semi structured interviews were used to ensure that the research aims could be addressed but that there was also scope for participants to 'tell their story' and give their experience as part of the process. A small amount of observation was carried out to facilitate the researcher to experience the dynamic of both the informal and formal interaction of parents with the school.

Case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis. The decision to focus on qualitative case studies emerges from the fact that this design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 1998 p28). Case study has been differentiated from other research designs by what Cronbach (1975) calls "interpretation in context" (p123).

Most qualitative research operates from the perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual and therefore the job of the interview is to ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus so that the situated knowledge can be produced (Mason 2006, p63). Qualitative interviewing is consistent with the ontological position that it is people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions which are the meaningful elements of the social reality

which these research questions are designed to explore. The research stance in this study is that knowledge and evidence are contextual, situational and interactional. Qualitative interviewing facilitates this is gaining access to participant's accounts and perceptions.

There was a structured template devised for each level of interview in this research process i.e. school—parental and staff levels and those interviewed with more of an overview role. This was to ensure that the thematic areas and emerging questions that were identified through the literature review could be addressed. However in terms of the approach of the researcher, how the template was used, how much scope was given to participants to emphasise elements they perceived as important,, a relatively informal style was used. The interviews were approached as 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess 1984, p102).

Using observation as a method provides the researcher with the opportunity to observe facts, events and behaviours. Observation is often part of ethnographic research and leads to a description of people, events and/or cultures (Moyle, 2002). It is then a holistic approach concerning the observation of 'everyday' events and the description and construction of meaning, rather than reproduction of events (Robson, 2002).

For the purpose of the small amount of observation carried out during this research process, it was important for the researcher to be non-participant in her approach. It did follow a naturalistic format in that the observation was not approached with definitive questions to be answered and there was nothing 'staged' or 'constructed' for the researcher to observe. There was an attempt to structure the data collection in the preparation of a template to record different data

elements of the observation. This was quite restrictive however and notes were taken consistently and freely throughout the observation.

Epistemological and ontological considerations may influence whether one chooses a participant/non participant approach to the observation. Someone drawn more to a non-participant approach would view the researcher's role as an objective, expert linked one believing that there is a world independent of the language we use to describe it and that knowledge about this world can be accessed through a bird's eye view of the data collected. This links closely with a positivist epistemology and a realist ontology. Observation is challenging as a research tool for the 'objective researcher' as in interpreting and analysing the data collected, one needs to be very aware of the underpinning values, beliefs, perceptions and expectation of situations. A participant approach would appeal more to those who come from the relativist ontology or social constructivist school of thought i.e. we cannot access an independent reality separate from the language and traditions that we use to describe it. There are epistemological considerations here in that observation is not a research tool that will provide data for a cause and effect, universal law positivist approach. Cohen et. al. (2007) assert that this research tool holds strong ecological validity in that it is context sensitive. The strength in this research method is its ability to allow for the individual context, to search for meaning in the individual in the situation being observed.

#### **Questerview template**

A 'Questerview' template (Appendix 1a) was devised for carrying out an interview in questionnaire format with the parents participating in the process. As part of a pilot project implemented prior to this research it emerged that parents may benefit from a facilitated interview rather than simply being asked to complete a questionnaire. This was deemed to be

the best way to maximise the parents' input and also to ensure there was understanding of what the research questions actually meant. It would also be helpful in terms of a return rate.

There were nine questerviews carried out with parents. The questerview template was also used to carry out interviews with an SNA working in one of the schools who was also a parent and the parental rep on the Board of Management. The interview with the parental rep on the BOM was also supplemented with questions 'checking back' after the observation of a Board of Management meeting.

#### **Interview templates**

The questerview template was used as a basis for the development of a interview template (Appendix 1b) with the school based staff and representatives of the Board of Managements e.g. Principals, Deputy Principals, Home School Liaison, Community Representative. There were then a further three templates (Appendix 1c) designed for interviews with individuals who had more of an overview of parental involvement and the leadership surrounding it. These templates were used as a basis but these interviews were less structured than the others. Also these interviews started to address some of the themes that had started to emerge in the questerviews and the interviews.

There were twelve interviews carried out, nine interviews in the schools and three with individuals identified as having somewhat of an overview of parental involvement and/or leadership.

#### **Observation**

On-going observation occurred in one of the schools and a formal observation occurred at one of their BOM meetings. There was limited possibility to observe in the other school and a formal observation of

their Board of Management was requested but was refused. An observation template was developed for the Board of Management meeting observed, the meeting was taped and a transcription was produced. There was also a sketch taken of the meeting layout.

#### **Extant data**

There was a wide range of documents and media material reviewed for this research. These included the content of the two school websites, the content of NPC and ET websites and the DES website. The material reviewed all relate to parental involvement in schools and the leadership and legislation relating to parental involvement. The documents reviewed included:

- School A's welcome pack to parents
- DES Primary Boards of Management Information Manual
- DES Information leaflet on Parents and Parents' Associations on Whole School Evaluation in Primary Schools
- National Parents Council documents i.e. Annual reports, Report on a migrant parent initiative, Education for Tomorrow policy paper (2011), Working Effectively as a Parent Association and NPC website
- Joint IPPN and NPC paper Supporting Each Other—a guide for the effective partnership between Principals and Parent Associations.

#### **Design of data collection tools**

Both the 'Questerviews' and the interviews were divided into sections based on key themes for the research. These themes were identified based on the Literature review and the three pillars underlying this research process. The 'Questerview' template contained four sections 1) participant profile, 2) parental involvement, 3) leading parental involvement and 4) leadership model. The interview template for school staff participants contained an additional section on social

inclusion/equity and social justice. The interview template for those participants with more of an overview role contained the same sections as those of the school based staff but the questions were changed to make them relevant to the participant's role and also to address some of the emerging themes from the school based interviews e.g. time resource, capacity to address parental involvement within a packed school agenda, how to respond to 'difference', values.

In devising and designing the questerview and the interview templates a number of elements were taken into account 1)the literature identifying the wide range of ways parental involvement occurs (Epstein 1985, 1990, 1992, 1995, 2002, 2006) 2) Epstein's findings in terms of stating that the school's approach to parental involvement must be purposeful and planned 3) an attempt to explore how reflective the school is in relation to parental involvement 4) an attempt to explore attitudes in relation to parental involvement 5) an attempt to ascertain if parental involvement is embedded in school structures and set of priorities 6) an exploration of participants understanding of social inclusion and commitment to social justice and equity.

### **Ethical factors**

As with all research the ethical implications of this study require some thought and discussion. Stake (1994) observes

*"Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict."*

(p244)

There appeared to be a high level of sensitivity around the substantive matter coupled with a lack of research in the area in Ireland and the fact that the research was being carried out in areas of designated



disadvantage. This led to a number of queries from the Ethics Committee within DCU regarding elements like literacy levels, access and informed consent.

As part of this application to the Ethics Committee within the University a number of ethical factors were addressed. In the Plain Language Statement and in the Informed Consent form the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Confidentiality was also assured and in the unlikely event that a participant's identity could be revealed through the research process by using a quote or supporting an emerging theme by using a participant's input that further consent would be sought. The level of detail and explanation through the Plain Language Statement and the Informed Consent form e.g. that the documents could be used in a court case did create some level of unease for the researcher in starting with this during the questerviews and interviews. This was more the case for the parent participants than for the professionals. The researcher was surprised that none of the parents withdrew from the process given the emphasis on informing them of the potential hazards of taking part.

It was identified as part of the Plain Language Statement that if any of the participants had any concerns following the interview that they could contact DCU and the research supervisor and the researcher's contact details were provided.

The observation was discussed at a Board of Management meeting before access was agreed. The act of observation may bring changes to the activity, rendering it somewhat atypical. In order to minimize this, interviews with Board of Management representatives were scheduled for after the observation so things could be 'checked' and 'verified'.

The researcher's working relationship with one of the schools also needs to be considered as part of the ethical factors of this research. The researcher works in the Community where one of the schools is situated and the service she works in provide a 'child-centred family support service' to a small number of families in the school. The school and the service also work on a number of area- wide education related initiatives together. Given the difficulty with access in the other school it may be that this working relationship was one of the primary reasons such wide access was given so readily e.g. there was no difficulty in observing the Board of Management meeting in this school. Given the critical theory approach and the apparent high power distance in existence the presentation of the findings to this school, particularly given the working relationship and the high level of interest in and co-operation with the research will need to be approached sensitively

### **Bias**

According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993) qualitative research "is distinguished partly by its admission of the subjective perception and biases of both participants and researcher into the research frame" (p 92). The researcher brings a construction of reality to the research situation which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 1998 p23). Case study researchers need to be aware of what they bring to a study. Case study researchers need to understand the issues beforehand but must be careful not to merely seek to use a case study to substantiate a preconceived position (Yin, 2009 p72). Yin identifies a possible test to your own bias i.e. the degree to which you are open to contrary findings. He proposes reporting your preliminary findings to two or three critical colleagues and seeking out alternative explanations and suggestions. This formed part of an on-going process of dialogue and discussion

within this research process both at the level of the overview participants and with the researcher's supervisor.

This research was part of a doctoral study. The doctoral programme was funded partly by the student's employer. The employer had no part in identifying the research substantive topics or in directing the student in anyway in relation to the study.

### **Rigour**

"Strategies for ensuring rigor must be built into the qualitative research process per se. These strategies include investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, theoretical sampling and sampling adequacy, an active analytic stance and saturation" (Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002, p9). Contrary to current practices, rigour does not rely on special procedures external to the research process itself (Ibid, p6)

In qualitative research verification refers to mechanisms used during the process to ensure reliability and validity and therefore the rigour of the study. As an iterative process the researcher must move back and forth between design and implementation to ensure consistency between question formulation, literature, participant recruitment, data collection strategies and analysis.

In this research study the researcher consistently responded to the developments in the research process, interrogating and reflecting on what was emerging and how that should impact the next stage of the study. The meetings and discussions with her supervisor supported this thinking and interface with the data. The participants who were interviewed as part of the process but who had a more of an overview role were an opportunity to 'check back' and 'bring back' some of the data

emerging from the more localised base of the school site data collection phase.

The research has combined a number of mechanisms to ensure rigour throughout the process:

- Multiple data sources (Yin, 2009)
- Making the researcher's position, the basis for selecting participants and the social context explicit (Le Compte and Preissle, 1993)
- Researcher responsiveness (Morse et al, 2002)
- Methodological coherence (ibid)
- Collecting and analysing the data concurrently (ibid)
- Thinking theoretically (ibid)
- Theory development (ibid)

External validity is the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. While this study is not designed in order to make predictions or generalisations applicable across the board, it is the case that as referenced by Stake (1995) there could be a 'naturalistic generalisation' for the reader in this study. This is where the readers draw on their own tacit knowledge, intuition and personal experience and look for patterns to explain their own experiences or what's happening around them (p85). This research will take cognisance of the following strategies in order to facilitate the reader:

- Provide rich thick description in the findings section
- Provide raw data prior to interpretation so that the reader can consider their own alternative interpretations

### **Data analysis**

Glaser (1969) suggests the 'constant comparative method' as a procedure for interpreting texts. This basically consists of four stages:

1. Comparing incidents applicable to each category,
2. Integrating categories and their properties,
3. Delimiting the theory, and
4. Writing the theory. (p. 220)

According to Goetz and LeCompte (1981) this method "combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed" (p. 58). As social phenomena are recorded and classified, they are also compared across categories. This process undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process, continuously feeding back into the process of category coding. "As events are constantly compared with previous events, new topological dimension, as well as new relationships, may be discovered" (Goetz & LeCompte, p. 58)

In relation to this research process a comparative process was used but based on some pre-determined themes. There were four thematic areas identified as part of the questerview and interview processes i.e. nature of parental involvement, leading parental involvement, leadership and issues relating to social inclusion and equity. As soon as the data collection phase commenced so too did the data analysis. The data collected from each interview and each group of interviews informed and influenced the next.

In the initial analysis phase the researcher took the data under each of these sections and compared it amongst participants. This was initially done in groups and per school e.g. parental group in School A, school

staff group in School A, BOM group in school A and the three participants with the overview role group and then parental group in School B, school staff group in School B. As mentioned previously the limited access in one of the schools did impact the level of actual comparison possible between the two school sites in this case study. The categories emerging from those groupings were then grouped into concepts/themes and then the concepts/themes were analysed across the data as a whole.

Data—data in participant groupings

Data—categories—across participant groupings

Categories—concepts/themes

Total data set—Core categories/themes

In coding the text the core categories/themes were treated as integrated across the total data set e.g. communication did not just emerge in the communication section but across the text. A further example of this is presented later in this chapter as part of the research process description.

### **Example 1**

#### **School A**

Responses to the question about whether parents are involved in Sports Day under the section looking for participants to define parental involvement in their schools

#### **Parent 1**

*Parent: We are not allowed to.*

*P: We would like to but we are not allowed to.*

Researcher: Ok

R: Is that a health and safety thing or.....

*P: I don't know.....we've just set up a PA so we are trying to find out about it. I think it's more to do with space wise...you know they do a lot in the yard because of the horses and the motorbikes going around the parks we can't bring them out to the parks*

R: So the yard is what's used

*P: Yeah and it's not big enough for the amount of parents that would turn up*

#### **Parent 2**

Just answered 'No' when asked

#### **Parent 3**

No for now, we are not allowed

#### **Parent 4**

Answered yes

#### **Parent 5**

I would if it was allowed but it's only the kids in this school.

#### **Parent 6**

Em well I'm here in anyway

*(Note this parent works in the school)*

#### **Categories**

Parent willingness and desire to be part of it

Differences in parent experience and perception

Issues of health and safety

Impact of wider community on school decision

Decision making around this—ownership and involvement

Potential issue for PA to address

Potential issue for collaboration with parents and wider community

### School staff responses

Principal: *Is sometimes over 2 days. One of the teachers with a post of responsibility looks after that for me. She organises it completely, she draws up a schedule, organises the medals, she organises the time table. So we generally have a junior day up to 2<sup>nd</sup> and a senior one. There is a variety of activities and we have done it a number of different ways. The first year, we got parents in to help us but it didn't work that well at that particular time so we found as we got more SNAs we didn't need the help and we found too that some parents were a bit worried that their child too wasn't going to get a medal or that they weren't involved in a race or something wasn't fair about it*

Researcher: And when the parents were involved it was kind of in a helping role was it?

P: *Yeah it was in a helping role yes because we found if some of them came to watch and then there were other kids whose parents hadn't come they were saying where's my Mammy or Daddy? So there was an element of that as well so you know it was a very small turnout so it would be better if it was just school based but you know that's still open to . . . yeah*

### HSCL Co-ordinator

Just answered 'No'

### Teacher

*Um parents weren't involved this year. Um, I'm trying to think of last year. No, they were,*

*Don't think they were involved*

*But what we had, we had, um older kids helping out*

### SNA

*Yes you would have some parents that would come in, yeah*



### Deputy Principal

*No so far it hasn't been raised, so far, now having said that some of the parents say on the parents committee might but not in the way I experienced it in my last school*

### Categories

Disconnect between staff and parent view  
Task focused approach—role of responsibility  
Principal's view of her role in it and her delegation of the responsibility  
'Role' of the parental involvement  
Concern about managing the parent's expectations and emotions around it  
Concern about managing the children's emotions around it  
Understanding of why parents might like to be involved i.e. older kids helping out not the same thing (linked to role above)  
Parents needing to raise the issue

#### Categories-Parent Grouping

Parent willingness and desire to be part of it  
Differences in parent experience and perception  
Issues of health and safety  
Impact of wider community on school decision  
Decision making around this—ownership and involvement  
Potential issue for PA to address  
Potential issue for collaboration with parents and wider community

#### Categories-Staff Grouping

Disconnect between staff and parent view  
Task focused approach—role of responsibility  
Principal's view of her role in it and her delegation of the responsibility  
'Role' of the parental involvement  
Concern about managing the parent's expectations and emotions around it  
Concern about managing the children's emotions around it  
Understanding of why parents might like to be involved i.e. older kids helping out not the same thing (linked to role above)  
Parents needing to raise the issue

## **Research process**

Two schools were invited to participate in this comparative case study exploring parental involvement with an emphasis on the leading of that involvement. The first school was selected based both on the principles that were integral to its genesis and the possibility of access, which it was thought could be problematic given the substantive topic. This school had been eagerly anticipated by its local community, for 20 years and those who drove this school had actually refused the provision of a regular national school in the late 90s and early 2000's on behalf of the local community—a controversial refusal at the time given the need for a school in the area.

The researcher was keen to have a comparative element to the research and looked to engage with a school which prioritized the parental involvement element as part of the set up phase of the school. Educate Together was identified as the Patron body who facilitated this type of involvement and it was intended that part of the research process would be to explore if this impacted in terms of levels of parental involvement and the leading of it. Educate Together Head Office were given a profile of the first school in terms of the age of the school, socio-economic indicators, local demographic and DEIS Band A status and asked to nominate a school to participate.

Both schools received written requests for participation and a briefing document regarding the research (Appendix 2). Time frames around agreeing access and participation differed in both schools and did impact the level and type of data collection in one of the schools. Access was easily achieved in the first school identified and the research process commenced there six months before the other school. The research was

carried out in School A over a three- month period. The research in School B was carried out at the end of the research process.

Contact with School B took six months to establish. When contact was secured with School B, the Principal did express some concerns in the initial discussions around participating in the research due to the substantive matter of the research being ‘parental involvement’. This primarily focused on the fact that it was an ‘emergency’ school and so did not have the typical ‘start up group’ of parents lobbying for the school as is usual with the Educate Together model. She was concerned about the impact of this on the nature of the school’s parental involvement. There were a number of further conversations and a meeting to respond to the queries from the school and to reiterate the process of seeking a comparative school regarding length of time established, demographic and area profile through the Educate Together Head Office. The Principal finally agreed to interviews with herself, the Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator (HSCL), a class teacher and two or three parents. The HSCL identified both the class teacher and the parents to be involved.

### **School profiles**

School A was established in September 2006 when the school moved into its purpose built building. There were 230 pupils enrolled in the school for the academic year the research took place and the school was staffed by 22 teachers and 8 SNAs. There is one full time Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator assigned to the school. There was one Home School Community Liaison from 2008-2010. A new HSCL commenced in the role in September 2010.

School B was established as an emergency school in September 2007 with 78 pupils and was housed temporarily in another building in the

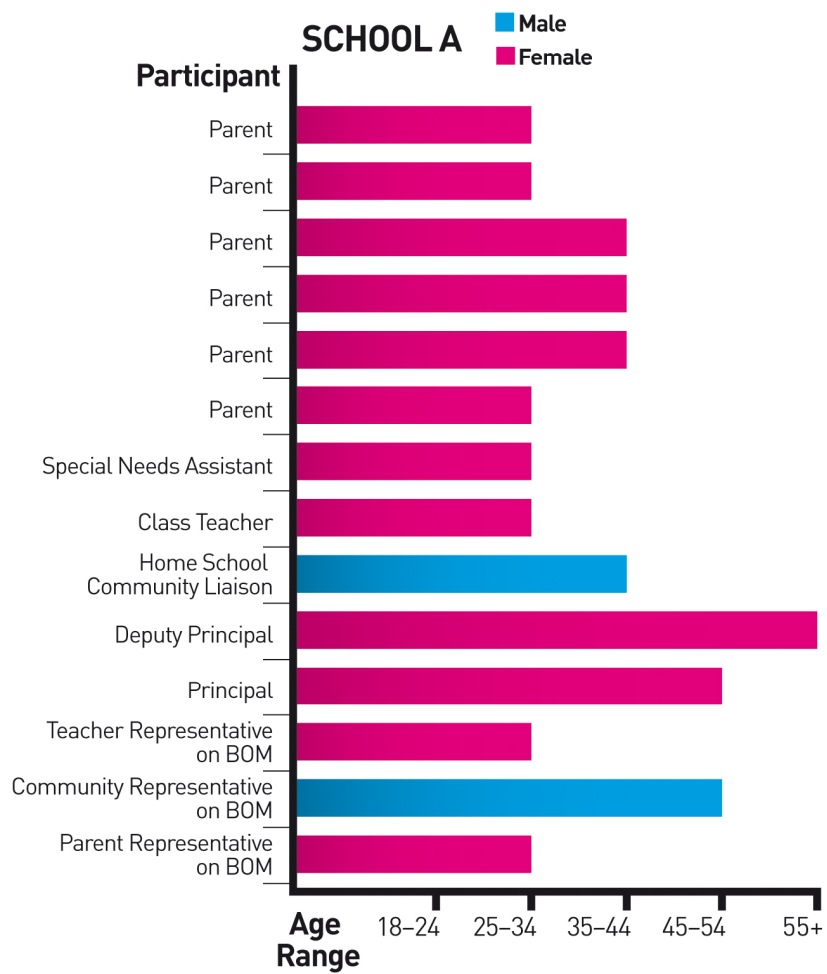
Community. The emergency status of the school arose from the fact that a large number, of mainly African families, were unable to find a school to enrol their child and the DES requested Educate Together to become patron to an emergency school. The school building was completed in 2008. There were 370 pupils enrolled in the school for the academic year the research took place. Figures on the numbers of school staff were unavailable. The school shares a HSCL post with a school in a neighbouring community with a DEIS band 2 status. There is a ratio of 85% international pupils and 15% indigenous Irish pupils in the school.

### **Sample of participants**

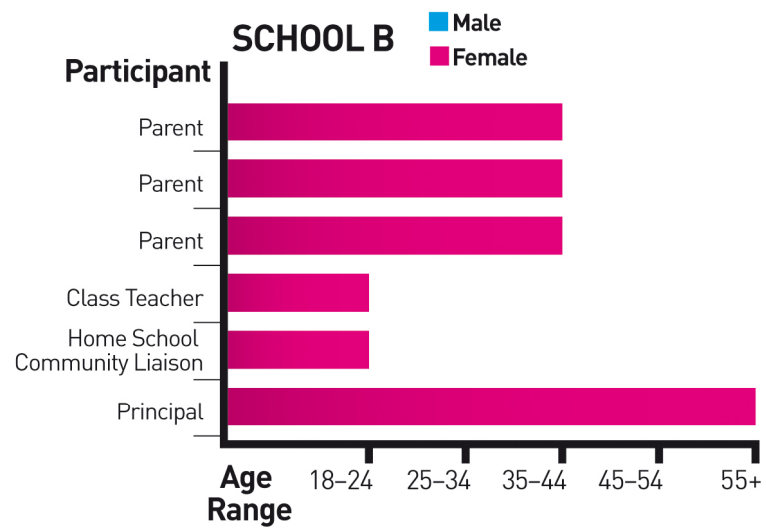
The research design was to accommodate input from participants across the different layers of the school community i.e. parents, school staff, school management and school leadership. Regarding the sample of parents selected it was hoped that this could be a random sample who would respond to an advertisement (Appendix 3). The research would seek to ensure input from a range of parents across the school i.e. with children from Junior Infants right up to fourth class. This appeared to be difficult and so the school staff, primarily the Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator's targeted parents to participate. In this targeting they attempted to ensure there was a parent from each level of the school and representative in terms of the school's demographic. Other participants were to be selected based on a role they carried out in the school community which was identified as integral to parental involvement e.g. the Home School Liaison Co-ordinator, the Principal, the Parent's rep on the Board of Management. In relation to the request to have a member of the teaching staff and a member of the Special Needs Assistants team participate, the schools self-selected the individuals to participate in the study.

The research design also sought to have individuals who had more of an overview of the substantive areas i.e. 'parental involvement' and 'leadership' included in the research process. This included a member of the Educate Together Management Team and the National Parents Council. Initially it was hoped that someone from the area of Equality Studies and also someone from the Irish Primary Principals Network would also be interviewed but given the way the research process progressed, the time available did not allow for this.

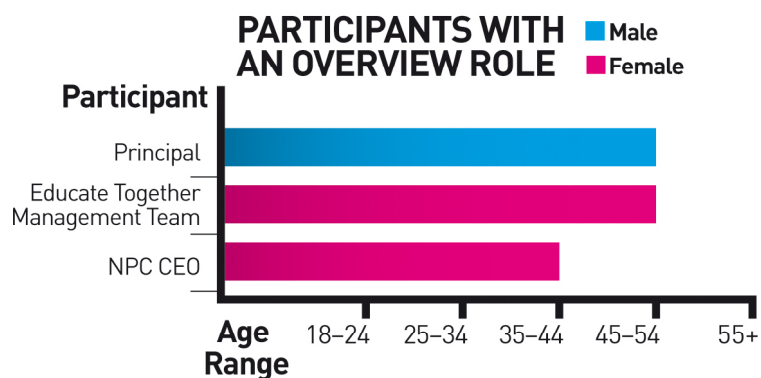
The tables below identify the participants in the study and a brief profile of them:



**Fig 4: Participants in School A**



**Fig 5: Participants in School B**



**Fig 6: Participants with an overview role**

School A	School B	Overview participants
<p>14 participants in total</p> <p>6 were interviewed in their role as parents in the school</p> <p>Of the remaining 8, 5 were also parents in addition to their professional roles within the school and 3 were not. The 3 that were not were all teaching staff in the school i.e. HSCL and two teachers</p>	<p>6 participants in total</p> <p>3 were interviewed in their role as parents in the school</p> <p>Of the remaining 3, 1 was also a parent in addition to their professional role within the school. The 2 that were not were all teaching staff in the school i.e. HSCL and the class teacher</p>	<p>3 participants in total</p> <p>Of the 3 participants, 2 were parents. The CEO of the NPC was not a parent.</p>



### **Timeline of contacts**

<b>October 2010</b>	Phone-calls to Primary School A and Educate Together Head Office
<b>November 2010</b>	Email formally requesting participation and 'School Briefing document' sent to School A and Educate Together Primary Education Officer  Poster given to School A to display  Educate Together Primary Education Officer informs researcher of school identified and gives contact details at end of November.
<b>January 2011</b>	Email to School B with School Briefing document
<b>February 2011</b>	Phone-calls made to School B to follow up. No contact established.
<b>March 2011</b>	Data collection commences in School A  Contact made with Educate Together Primary Officer to ensure School B aware of research and query if it was ok to continue to contact them  Email received to say it was and that School B just had a lot on recently
<b>April 2011</b>	Establish phone-contact with School B Arrange to meet Principal in May
<b>May 2011</b>	Meeting with Principal in School B  Observation of BOM arranged with Principal  Observation of BOM cancelled at request of Chairperson of BOM  Concerns identified by Chairperson addressed by sending Plain Language Statement and Informed Consent Form and offer of discussion directly with Researcher and/or Supervisor

School Principal identifies that she remains interested in participating and that she will discuss it at the BOM meeting

**June 2011**

First overview participant contacted regarding interview.

Interview with first overview participant takes place.

**September 2011**

School B contacted by phone  
Principal identifies that the school would like to go ahead with interviews at parent and staff level.

Research commences in School B.

Two overview interviews also occur.

### Interview Schedule

<u>Interview Schedule</u>	<u>Dates</u>
<b>Participant 1 (School A Staff)</b>	<b>11<sup>th</sup> March 2011</b>
<b>Participant 2 (Parent School A)</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2011</b>
<b>Participant 3 (Parent School A)</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2011</b>
<b>Participant 4 (Parent School A)</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2011</b>
<b>Participant 5 (Parent School A)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> April 2011</b>
<b>Participant 6 (Parent School A)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> April 2011</b>
<b>BOM observation (School A)</b>	<b>10<sup>th</sup> May 2011</b>
<b>Participant 7 ( School Staff)</b>	<b>13<sup>th</sup> May 2011</b>
<b>Participant 8 (BOM rep)</b>	<b>20<sup>th</sup> May 2011</b>
<b>Participant 9(BOM rep)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> June 2011</b>
<b>Participant 10 (Parent)</b>	<b>16<sup>th</sup> June 2011</b>
<b>Participant 11 (School Staff)</b>	<b>20<sup>th</sup> June 2011</b>
<b>Participant 12 (School Staff)</b>	<b>20<sup>th</sup> June 2011</b>
<b>Participant 13 Overview</b>	<b>24<sup>th</sup> June 2011</b>
<b>Participant 14 (School A Staff)</b>	<b>27<sup>th</sup> June 2011</b>
<b>Participant 15 (School A Staff part 1)</b>	<b>27<sup>th</sup> June 2011</b>
<b>Participant 15 (school A Staff part 2)</b>	<b>30<sup>th</sup> June 2011</b>
<b>Participant 16 (Parent School B)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> September 2011</b>
<b>Participant 17 (Parent School B)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> September 2011</b>

<b>Participant 18 (Parent School B)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> September 2011</b>
<b>Participant 19 (School B Staff)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> September 2011</b>
<b>Participant 20 (School B Staff)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> September 2011</b>
<b>Participant 21 (School B Staff)</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> September 2011</b>
<b>Participant 22 (Overview)</b>	<b>16<sup>th</sup> September 2011</b>
<b>Participant 23 (Overview)</b>	<b>30<sup>th</sup> September 2011</b>

## **Data analysis**

Each ‘questerview’ and interview was taped and transcribed. A transcript was produced of the observation and researcher field notes kept.

The tools for data collection were designed to address the main aims of the research as identified earlier in the Chapter. The data collection tools explored categories and themes identified in the findings of previous studies and in the literature as being important indicators for optimum levels of parental involvement. It could be argued that there was an element then of ‘pre-determined’ themes to the research. However the research process also facilitated the inputting or emphasis of elements that participants experienced as important, to demonstrate how contextual elements may be impacting and to ‘go beyond’ the way the questerviews and interviews were structured.

In coding the text, emergent themes were treated as crosscutting and integrated across the full text e.g. leadership did not simply emerge in the leadership section but across the text under a number of sections. The coding of the text began shortly after the first few interviews. This

facilitated an iterative process whereby the data being collected was examined by the researcher and the themes emerging informed the next stages of data collection. There were both deductive and inductive elements to this process in that themes for discussion had been generated from previous studies and relevant research findings and used in the 'questerview' and interview process. Through engagement with the data during the data analysis phase further dimensions to the predetermined themes emerged.

An example of the integrated dimension to the data analysis process has already been identified when the example was given relating to the Sports Day in School A and the variances and additional elements that emerged rather than a focus solely on defining Parental Involvement.

Below is a second example in response to questions to a) school staff around how the school feeds back to parents on the topic of parental involvement and b) to parents on how they know about parental involvement in the school. These responses to the question focused on whether involvement in the Parents Association was a mechanism for communicating what is going on.

### **Example 2**

Parents Question on Questerview

"How do you know about parental involvement in this school?"

(Involvement in the Parents Association was one of the options given)

Parent 1	No
Parent 2	No, not involved
Parent 3	No
Parent 4	No
Parent 5	Yes
Parent 6	Yes
Parent Rep on BOM	<p>I'm not on it. But they're trying to get me on this one. So I don't know what way that's going to be . . . at the start when I got elected like, it was, like, the parents were coming up to me saying this, this and this, like and it's your job. You need to do it like. So I got real upset over it and had to talk to E (the Principal) about it like and at the first meeting they said look we know the issues that come about but you need to say some it's not your job. If they have a problem to go to the Parents Association first and then the Parents Association brings it to the Board.</p> <p><i>Ok, so how is that done then? Through you or E (the Principal) or??</i> Through E (the Principal) yeah. <i>Ok.</i></p>

#### Categories

- Parent view dependant on whether they are involved in PA or not
- Role of Parent Rep on BOM in relation to PA and general parent population
- Role of Principal in relation to Parent Rep
- Communication to Parent Rep re:her role
- Support for Parent Rep
- Interpretation of management role in relation to Parent Rep

- Capacity for parents to contribute to leadership in this dynamic/structure
- Power implication/impact on decision making for the Principal being the feedback mechanism from PA to BOM

Staff/Board question was

How does the school feedback to the parents about parental involvement in this school? Parents Association again was an option.

SNA	Yeah I'd say they would find out a lot of stuff through them yeah
Principal	Yes. And that's why I think there has maybe been some disagreements or some misconceptions over the past year because there wasn't that mechanism in place and in fact the 2 parents that are on the Board Of Management, in the absence of having a PA they would have been hounded by some parents to take some issues straight to Board level which weren't suitable for Board level at all and they really should have been dealt with at PA level. But now that we have the PA I keep saying issues can be dealt with at a local level and I can be brought in and ensure everything is sorted before it goes out of control.
HSCL	Yeah there was interest yeah, we had people that came em em you know it was good to actually see a lot of them enthusiastic individuals and eh at this moment in time we have 5 members on the PA and I'm trying to perhaps build on that em we do have them every Monday unfortunately sometimes, times don't suit the individuals as well, people are working people are you know might have little ones they have to look after so they can't attend meetings and that so as I said hopefully it will be a snowball effect and it will get bigger.



Deputy Principal	Yeah through that and the Board of Management
Board member (Community Rep)	I wouldn't know at all.
Board member (Teacher Rep)	Yeah ( <i>hesitant yeah, researcher's comment</i> )

#### Categories

- Lack of clarity of function of PA for SNA and her view of herself as separate from it despite she being a parent
- Possible impact of 'historical context' and previous experience with parents
- Focus of PA as a problem solving mechanism from management
- Role of Principal in relation to PA
- The Principal's view of parental concerns requiring 'controlling' from Principal
- A parent body seeking out 'addressing' of issues (albeit inappropriately at BOM level)
- Access issues in relation to PA due to time, work commitments and childcare issues
- Lack of knowledge at Board level (maybe apart from staff representative)

Categories Parent grouping	Categories Staff/Board grouping
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent view dependant on whether they involved in PA or not</li> <li>• Role of Parent Rep on BOM in relation to PA and general parent population</li> <li>• Role of Principal in relation to Parent Rep</li> <li>• Communication to Parent Rep re: her role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of clarity of function of PA for SNA and her view of herself as separate from it despite she being a parent</li> <li>• Possible impact of 'historical context' and previous experience with parents</li> <li>• Focus of PA as a problem solving mechanism from management</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training/Support for Parent Rep</li> <li>• Management role in relation to Parent Rep</li> <li>• Capacity for parents to contribute to leadership in this dynamic/structure</li> <li>• Power implication/impact on decision making of the Principal being the feedback mechanism from PA to BOM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of Principal in relation to PA</li> <li>• The Principal's view of parental concerns requiring 'controlling' from Principal</li> <li>• A parent body seeking out 'addressing' of issues (albeit inappropriately at BOM level)</li> <li>• Access issues in relation to PA due to time, work commitments and childcare issues</li> <li>• Possible information gap at Board level apart from staff representative</li> </ul>
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### **Next stage**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Core categories/themes</b>
Role of Principal in relation to Parent Rep  Support for parent rep  Interpretation of management's role in relation to Parent Rep  Focus of PA as a problem solving mechanism  Principal's view of parental concerns requiring 'controlling' from Principal  Lack of knowledge at Board level  Capacity for parents to contribute to leadership in this dynamic/structure	Leadership role/construct
Role of parent rep on BOM in relation to PA and general parent population  Role of Principal in relation to PA	Decision-making (Role of power)

Power implication/impact on decision making with the Principal being the feedback mechanism from PA to BOM	
<p>Parent view dependant on whether they involved in PA or not</p> <p>Communication to parent rep and general parent body re: her role</p> <p>Lack of clarity of function of PA for SNA and her view of herself as separate from it despite being a parent</p> <p>A parent body seeking out 'addressing' of issues (albeit inappropriately at BOM level)</p> <p>Lack of knowledge at BOM level</p>	Communication
<p>Role of Principal in relation to Parent Rep</p> <p>Possible impact of 'historical context' and previous experience with parents</p> <p>Principal's view of parental concerns requiring controlling from Principal</p>	<p>Values</p> <p>Impact of context</p>
Access issues in relation to the PA due to time available, work commitments and childcare issues	Structural barriers

Chapter 4 contains a presentation of findings from the two school sites in the case study. The findings are presented firstly in relation to the general aims of the research. The most relevant emerging themes in relation to parental involvement and the leading of it in areas experiencing educational inequality are then presented and discussed.

## Chapter 4—Presentation of Findings; School A and School B

*“Parents input is valuable . . . if the agenda is set by the school”*

*(Board of Management Community representative.)*

*“I’d like to think that we would be working together yeah . . . to an extent the parents are following the school’s lead because they know what they are doing.”*

*(School Special Needs Assistant and Parent)*

### Introduction

This Chapter presents the research findings from the two school sites.

The aims of the research are as identified in Chapter 1. The data was collected using a case study approach and the data was analysed using constant comparative method.

The key methods and collection tools in relation to the two school sites were:

1. Questerviews with nine parents and one Special Needs Assistant
2. Semi-structured interviews completed with two school Principals, a Deputy Principal, two Home School Liaison Co-ordinators, two class Teachers, one Teacher Board of Management representative, one Parent Board of Management representative, one Community Board of Management representative.
3. A small amount of observation. This observation included

<p>observation of the day- to -day activities within one of the schools and of a formal Board of Management meeting in one of the schools.</p>
<p>4. A review carried out of extant data relating to the topic as detailed in Chapter 3.</p>

### **Presentation of findings**

Following an overview of the findings in relation to the aims of the research the presentation shifts to an emphasis on two of Epstein’s Six Types of Parental Involvement that emerge as particularly relevant to this research i.e. Communication and Decision Making. Communication and Decision Making are naturally interconnected and relate to other themes that emerge. With the emphasis on leading parental involvement and equity/inclusion in this research, Communication and Decision Making emerge as key themes. If this research were solely designed to explore the nature of parental involvement currently in Ireland the presentation of findings would focus on Type 3 Volunteering. Findings relating to School A and School B are presented separately and similarities and differences are identified and discussed. In this context there is also a short discussion on leadership in the two school contexts and a discussion on potential sources of inequality using the Lynch and Lodge framework to present and comment on those findings. The presentation of findings includes a sample of the various ‘voices’ of the research to facilitate the reader to identify commonalities and differences and to ensure that the reader can be a participant and critical thinker in relation to the data presented and the commentary that ensues.

In relation to the aims of the research both schools demonstrate a hope and wish that parental involvement should be part of their school culture and community. However neither school demonstrate the capacity to ensure this wish becomes a reality in a meaningful way in terms of prioritising parental involvement, discussing and reviewing it, or how it is managed as part of the work of the school. School A manages to ensure that 'parental involvement' is built into the architecture of the school by including it in Job Descriptions of the posts of responsibilities. This ensures that all events and some school programme related activities have a parental involvement element but it impacts however on the nature of the parental involvement and how it is planned for and discussed. School B focuses very much on relationship building with parents on an individual basis. This is by way of response to the presenting needs both social and cultural. The actual levels of engagement could not be determined as no formal records of involvement are currently maintained by either school. Based on the data collected during the course of this research neither school could be said to be yet operating a meaningful 'partnership' with parents.

In relation to defining what constitutes parental involvement it emerges in this research that there is a resounding identification of parents primarily as volunteers in 'helping out roles' within the school context. This is detailed and evidenced in a range of responses across the research. Please find below some examples:

***"so um again like that parents were in, gardening, getting the library ready, um, helping tidy, um shared spaces and things like that."***

Class Teacher

***"yeah coz like we are already helping out with the course like the whole point in setting it up is to take some stress off the teachers to help out"***

***with fundraising if they needed something or if they need any extra help, we are here to help them out”***

Parent

The emphasis from both the parents and the school on volunteering in relation to parental involvement is evident in both schools and examples were identified from supporting celebrations, fundraising, gardening and library work and being a car-parking attendant outside the school. In School A there is also a large emphasis on the courses that the HSCL organises to both attract parents into the school and to ‘upskill’ the parents. This had less of an emphasis in School B. This may be due to a cut in funding in terms of what courses could be offered and/or the fact that the HSCL role is shared with another school and is also acting as Deputy Principal in School B.

Neither School A nor School B demonstrated any awareness of research or referenced any best practice methods in terms of strategizing or prioritising parental involvement. ‘Relationship’ was prioritised by some participants in School A and most participants in School B. Neither school had any clear statement of intent in relation to a parental involvement strategy or a clear action plan, both of which would be part of Epstein’s recommendations on securing positive and meaningful involvement. The schools were driven mainly by the legislative requirements around the Parents Association and the two parent representatives on the Boards of Management.

The next section presents the findings under two of Epstein’s six types of involvement, Type 2 Communication and Type 5 Decision Making. A table outlining Epstein’s work on Communication and Decision Making is presented in Appendix 4 which identifies definitions, sample practices,

challenges, redefinitions and the caring synonyms for Communication and Decision Making, all of which are important according to Epstein's research in terms of the implementation of an effective parental involvement strategy.

## **Communication**

### **School A**

In School A there are evident differences of understanding, levels of information and knowledge, and/or perception across the range of participants interviewed. A lot of this appeared to focus on Communication—mechanisms, methods and the decisions taken (conscious or unconscious) about who needs to know what? Different groupings of individuals were aware or unaware of different things. In some ways this is not unusual in an organisational context. However some of them are quite fundamental to the roll out of parental involvement strategies in the school e.g. the Principal had not communicated the DEIS priorities in relation to parental involvement to the HSCL Co-ordinator, who she identified as the individual responsible for 'operationalising' them. This could be explained by the HSCL only being in the role since September 2010 or that the priority for the period just prior to the research appeared to be the establishment of a Parents Association. It is however a gap in terms of communicating key areas of work.

There were quite a number of examples where different things had been communicated to different participants, for example reasons why parents could not be involved in School Sports Day, whether parents helped out on school trips, whether parental involvement was recorded or not,



whether Maths4fun was done in the school. With the exception of Sports Day, this confusion relating to these issues mainly gave the sense more of a lack of structure, cohesion, clarity and feedback mechanisms around what is being organised and who is doing it rather than information being withheld.

Participants had some different perceptions about how the school was feeding back to parents and the communication mechanisms. For example it is evident in the quotes displayed below that they had various understandings of whether the school organised feedback meetings to the parents:

When asked if the Home School holds feedback meetings:

***I'm not sure. I'm sure he does.***

Class Teacher

***Yeah I think R (HSCL) is fairly good alright at having meetings with the parents to inform them.***

Deputy Principal

***Em well that's part of the PA but we haven't really set it up properly yet . . . the way I do it, because I do a lot of home visits obviously I do tell parents occasionally eh what has actually occurred and what is actually coming up.***

Home School

When asked if the Principal holds feedback meetings:

***I know there's definitely meetings  
Em, I'm sure if, in certain situations, um there'd be a review meeting. Maybe an issue had come up and they would have a review meeting?***

Class Teacher

When asked about BOM feeding back:

***Feedback meetings, em at the Board Of Management yeah it would be discussed about what the parents can divulge back to the parents***

Teacher rep on BOM

***Not yet but I think we'll probably have that fairly soon around Mary McAleese's visit and what have you and I'll get a few more bodies on board***

Principal

When asked if there were any other feedback/communication mechanisms

***Well they feedback to each other is that what you mean? . . . well they would feed back a lot to each other. I suppose that is something that we could work on getting parents to be peer workers like we've had some parents help giving courses em just even to do peer visits that would be something but like that's down the line a good bit.***

Teacher Representative BOM

Whilst discussing if the school review or revisits events from the perspective of parental involvement in terms of how the event was planned or implemented:

***Well, it hasn't come up, em in front of the whole staff—but like that, I don't know. Em maybe Home School does that . . .***

Class Teacher

***Em, as part of our DEIS we do yeah. Annually.***

Principal

***Yes I do I do. I review and I talk with the PA regarding that and I need to get and incorporate parents views on courses on why numbers are low you know especially for the course tutor I do talk to the parents regarding the course get their feedback and then I report that back to the course tutor. As I said honesty is the best policy. When parents are honest then I am honest with the course tutor we can come to some solution and see what works best. You know there is no point in running a course if people aren't going to attend it so I need basically, we have to have a quality course and quality service em and that also the parents are comfortable and that they enjoy it. It's very important that they enjoy it aswell.***

Home School Liaison

***Mmm well through the review that would come up—as a, yes. Parental Involvement. Yes. That will come now. And next week, E (Principal) and I will probably sit down and go through all of those reviews and that informs the the plan then for the next year.***

Deputy Principal

Again the differences are prevalent in the parents' inputs presented below:

***“Not really to give or get feedback but to give information about other things. I suppose like the One Book One Community is being done in the school, em so it's just to inform parents about that, sort of when there's things coming up.”***

Parent

***“Laughs, oh I don't know, laughs again”*** (appears to be out of nervousness or the not knowing-researcher's comment)

Parent

***“I think she's only had two meetings like by calling them. So em I wouldn't say she has an awful lot unless like she probably has them more for teachers.”***

Parent

***“Em (long pause) to the parents, em no I don’t know if he’s hold a feedback meeting but he’d talk to the parents in relation to a course. Like say in the newsletter a course had gone really well and we were running it again he’d say it to a few parents.”***

Parent

Regarding feedback meetings by the Parents Association

***“I don’t think so but now I don’t know but I haven’t heard anything. I don’t think it’s up and running that long.”***

Parent

***“Not that I’ve heard of.”***

Parent

Communication around parental involvement amongst the staff is very task oriented and task led. The element of parental involvement is embedded in the school through ensuring that each post of responsibility includes it in their planning of school events. This ensures it occurs as a task but it appears to decrease the regularity or need for full staff communication, discussion or any process and/or developmental work around it. There is no regular structured time or agenda item given to parental involvement in a more general sense at school staff meetings and it focuses on specific, usually school related items e.g. World Book Day, Science Day. It also can be focused on ‘managing parents’ and how best to communicate and respond to difficulties that may arise.

***“it’s written into the Job Descriptions of the em of the post-holders you know that Parental Involvement in their subject area to nurture it and develop it. So for example when H was going to have a visual arts open evening then it’s well what will the parental involvement be, so you might have them in serving teas***

***and coffees, they might be selling some of the art work or whatever”***

Principal

The majority of the parents identified the ‘text a parent’ as the most effective communication tool for the school to use. This was seen as a preferred communication method rather than letters or notes home in school bags. This also appeared to be effective from the school staff’s perspective. The school newsletter was also referenced although the section on parents, identifying what is happening, is currently being completed by the Home School Liaison Co-ordinator. It also appears that this is more an information- sharing tool from the school to the parents e.g.

***“There’s a newsletter that goes out to everybody yeah***

From the school?

***Yeah they make it up and send it out.***

Is there a section for parents in that?

***Yeah like if there is courses coming up they tell ya there.”***

Parent

One of the parents spoke about her wish for the newsletter

***“We are trying to set one of them up now at the moment. The school has a newsletter but HCSL is trying to sort it that we have our own little section so we can let people know about it, about things that are happening in the school.”***

Structured meetings have been organised around the start of the new school year to communicate expectations to the parents, electing representatives for the Board of Management and initiating the Parents

Association. There are then also the usual annual Parent Teacher meetings. The involvement of parents in the Parent Teacher meetings was one of those areas where some of the participants had differing perspectives and views. The majority of parents and all of the school staff identified that parents attended parent teacher meetings. A couple of parents however identified that they felt that parents didn't attend parent teacher meetings, that it was the same parents that did every year. One parent identified that when she has talked to parents about the parent teacher meetings and they have said *"it's a waste of time"*.

In an interview with a school staff participant about how parental involvement might be embedded in the school structure it was discussed about it appearing on the school staff meeting agenda. The experience of this in School A relates specifically to parent-teacher meetings however and not parental involvement more generally. It also seemed to focus on pre-empting potential difficulties.

***"And then when it comes to parent-teacher meetings, we would have a slot in our, our staff meeting about, um you know, giving feedback. And we have talked about before, you know if a parent extended the time or you know was getting a bit upset or aggressive or um just to really call for assistance you know if an issue had come up."***

Class Teacher

There appears to be a preference for an informal style of communication with parents. Parents on an individual basis can request meetings to discuss any range of matters. The Principal appeared to be more aware of this happening than other participants.

When asked if parents request meetings to talk about things

**“Yes and they are actually very good at asking (tone here is slightly incredulous as if this is a surprise). (Laughs a bit) Ok, because people would have the impression that in a disadvantage area parents don’t have the self-esteem to come and ask whereas I find that sometimes the ‘pushiness’ and we’ll find a better word for that, but that that can be their crutch and they might not have the information or the educational background but they certainly have the ‘gumption’**

When asked if the parents are made aware of what structure they should use or if they just arrive?

**No they will just arrive although at the start of the year when we have group meetings I meet the parent body in each class and I do the same meeting 13 times ad nauseam. I go in first thing in the morning for an hour and we go through all of that, if you have a problem what do you do. Now like it’s all written down but they don’t read a lot of what you send home. So what do you do? You go to the teacher first then etc. so all of those structures but there wouldn’t be a high level of attendance at those meetings there’d only be about 60% attendance at those group meetings and the parents that that meeting is actually more for and who you want to hear the message generally don’t. They find it hard to delay gratification when they have an issue and em I, that’s why I monitor the playground of a morning so that the teachers are not accosted and that, which could very well happen. It gets through over time, like a parent of a junior infant maybe might and then later they’ll be like I know I know I am supposed to make an appointment and em so I would say that maybe half the parents do make appointments.**

The underlined elements in the quote above identify the Principal’s view and value judgements in relation to some of the parents in the school. It also indicates an underlying tension with regard to a particular profile of parent i.e. one that is anxious to address an issue and may find it difficult to manage their emotions around that and require some response. The Principal appears to experience this as quite negative and her language around this seems to indicate that she feels the need to put in controls as a response and being in the ‘power position’ she can do this. An element of the ‘relational’, ‘emotional’ and ‘cultural’ dynamic of the school is evident when she identifies that ‘it gets through over time.’ Again this gives the impression of a one way, school-parent

communication about the way things will be and not a developmental dialogue or conversation about how things might best function while identifying examples of times when an unscheduled conversation might be possible. Epstein's two defining synonyms of caring which underlie all six types of involvement i.e. trust and respect appear to be particularly absent here.

The parents spoke of enjoying the informal nature of communication with other parents and with the Home School Liaison Co-ordinator and some with the teachers. They spoke of having access to the Principal and the Class Teachers in the morning time. There is a large staff presence in the morning time. However if there are issues that will take any length of time to deal with or respond to, parents must make an appointment.

A Whiteboard has been constructed in the school- yard for the school to put up reminders about PE gear, school events, book bills etc. This was referenced and mentioned more by staff than by parents during the course of the research.

As identified above there are meetings organised with class teachers at the start of the year and the Principal also attends some of these.

The Class Teacher describes these meetings:

***“we have another meeting at the beginning of the year when I meet all the parents in the school and we just say what, what the plan is for the year as regards our expectations for the curriculum, behaviour, homework and like that we'd say to the parents if there is anything we can help with let us know.”***

And is that a general school wide approach or is that just your approach?



***“No. It would be a general school wide approach.” “If there’s anything we can do, we can help and you know we try to have an open door policy but not just in you can just come in whenever you want like and make an appointment or arrange a meeting and if there’s anything we can help you with.”***

Class Teacher

The methods of communication identified by the parents could be said to reflect on how they see their role in relation to the school. The ‘text a parent’ is a one-way information sharing mechanism. There are some examples of parents initiating communication around their individual children and concerns they have about their learning and/or behaviour. When this occurs, it was reported that the school responds in a supportive way to the parents. However the general sense was that it was school led and school based conversation and discussion. Unlike Epstein’s model of a two-way and three-way communication where mechanisms for listening and taking on board feedback are as important as information sharing, the participants all focused primarily on a one way communication school to parent. It is encouraging that one of the parents, currently involved in the development of the Parents Association, has a vision for becoming more involved in the school newsletter. This may change the focus of that also being a one-way information sharing communication structure. Communication appears to focus very much on curriculum matters, school expectations, requests to support celebrations and school concerns around behaviour. Outlined below are some examples from the school’s Welcome Booklet. The text is as it appears in the booklet:

Under ‘Health and Good Practices’

**We are very proud of our high standards in all aspects of the life and workings of our school and we work very hard to maintain these standards.**

**Staff and children observe high standards of dress, in the form of agreed dress codes. Parents/guardians/siblings respect this code and support it by—**

**Not entering the building or playground while dressed in nightwear/pyjamas**

Under 'Playground'

Parents attending courses/helping out in the school are asked NOT to distract their own child(ren) during school hours, as it can cause upset for the child and the whole class.

The comment about pyjamas is a culturally sensitive comment given the context of the school and there may be a better method of discussion/communication regarding pyjamas rather than the 'Welcome Booklet'. The use of capital letters, bold font and underlined words occurs throughout the booklet and is quite striking when reading it in terms of the emphasis on instruction and direction. The Home School Partnership page contains such emphasis only to communicate that the Parents Room is for ALL PARENTS. There is also a more welcoming sense from the content on this page e.g. Children love to see their parents involved in the school and it's a great way to get know other parents and teachers.

There is an opportunity to develop more two-way communication in terms of the initiation of the communication with the individuals currently developing the Parents Association. For the most part parents did not recognise any difficulty with the current communication structures. The issue of their perceived role and power is prevalent in this.

From the data collected it can be argued that the communication is mainly school led, school focused, one-way and there is huge scope to develop these conversations to focus more on developmental activities within the school and community rather than the school-based task oriented nature of them currently. At management level and in discussions with staff there appears to be a focus in School A on 'managing problematic interactions' with parents. The Class Teacher did give a number of examples of positive interactions she had with parents, in terms of parents seeking her support with bed time routines, eating difficulties and other behavioural issues. However in identifying how parental involvement is discussed in whole staff contexts the focus is primarily on pre-empting and addressing potential difficulties. For the parent participants in the research—both those involved and uninvolved in the school—the importance of 'relationship' is emphasised. Relationship was also identified as vitally important by the Class Teacher and the Home School Liaison. It was less emphasised by the Principal, the Deputy Principal and the Teacher Representative on the Board of Management, all who comprise the Management Team within the school.

## **School B**

Communication mechanisms in School B focused mainly on informal conversations between parents, 'meet and greet' with the Principal and some class teachers in the morning and 'an open door policy' operated by the Principal. There was an 'ad hoc' sense to the communication in School B but with an emphasis on relationship. There appeared to be a lot of 'reacting/responding' to on-going mainly social issues with some of the families and this may be impacting on the school's capacity to identify a clear, whole school approach and strategy to their parental involvement. Also the perceived barriers around language and culture could be contributing to what appeared with some participants to be a

sense of inertia and 'helplessness' to change the current situation. This was particularly the case with one of the parents and the HSCL. The parents' perceptions differed on whether the school was doing enough to communicate effectively with parents and to secure parental involvement although all agreed that the Principal did want it.

The Principal appears very committed to securing positive relationships with the parents and invests in on-going informal communication through operating 'her open door policy'. This is time consuming and can leave little time for proactive planning or meetings to address issues relating to parental involvement more strategically across the school. In the school's current context the Principal and Home School identify 'relationship' as the key to securing engagement with parents.

**"Now I always try to come from that, that aspect of respect. Because then you're making the connection. But I said now this is where I've had to move to and I said look, and these are the benefits. Because they're, they're very much rooted in their cultural communities that they came from because they've lost their cultural community here and you're trying to engage them always with respect. Because I, I'm not here, I'm not going to be the one standing up high and mighty, judging anybody. But they have to and I will tell them straight up that I, they have to comply with the law. . . I've had men in the office crying because their wives now that has, she realises her rights in this country and when they've been treated differently somewhere else. And I just say to the man 'You can't hit her. You can't do this.' I said 'you change or you'll lose everything . . . Oh there's huge cultural issues.'"**

Principal

The boundary of the role of the Principal and the extent to which her power can/should go is raised in this last quote. There are clearly legal and social concerns to be balanced with cultural differences. This will be discussed later in the Chapter.

**" And then as well uh kind of said before, the cultural issues of you know a lot of a lot of families aren't used to kind of being invited**

**into a school environment. You know they're, they don't like, the fact that they're welcomed is, is strange to them . . . I think a lot of it, it it kind of comes back to the home school and what you're offering and do you know, like making links with the parents and calling into the houses but there's only so many houses you can get to a week. And then if an issue arise with a, a particular family, like, uh a crisis issue, well then you're working with that and you mightn't get to the you know you're not going to get to the other stuff . . . and kind of it really is, it's building up a relationship with them that even they come, like it's taken nearly a year to come up to the door."**

Home School Liaison Co-ordinator

There is a school newsletter but with no specific input around the parents or what might be going on in the school with the Parents Association or the courses for parents. One of the parents interviewed has taken on the role to email and/or text the parents' updates but this does not appear to be part of a wider, whole school approach in terms of communication to parents. One of the parents identified that she felt there was room for more communication with some of the teaching staff and with the school more generally in communicating with parents how they could be involved and what was expected from them and their roles in the school.

**"I'd say there are some that definitely want the partnership but don't know how to go about it. Em there are definitely parents that are interested but they don't know how to go about eh where the boundaries lie? Yeah and also we are a very multicultural school em and some of the thinking is that you don't challenge authority so therefore they feel that you don't question a teacher you don't question a Principal and because of that then they kind can withhold their true feelings or thoughts you know about what and culturally the parents don't like to challenge . . . As a parent who is sitting on the Board I would feel right ok and perhaps it's again because of other commitments and so on but I would like to see, literally like M (Principal) is fantastic and she's down there every morning but personally I would like to see more. I would like to have the BOM like a complete openness and it's interesting that you say this, ask this because on my way in here I met one of the parents and I haven't seen her since we've come back and she said to me do you know I don't even know who is on the BOM and I said well I**

**am but hearing what you're saying we need to put this on our website . . . the openness in the communication about what is happening and what parents can do. So we are going to hold a welcome meeting, so that's coming up."**

Parent, ET rep BOM

The Principal held a slightly different view on this and identified that due to the cultural differences there were no issues with boundary crossing by the parents.

**"We don't have an issue with, uh, our parents crossing over the, the margins. They're not there at all, whereas that can be such an issue in some schools. You know the power struggle and the certain group getting the, and having their way and they're only interested in their own little corner and the, you know. At least we don't have that. We don't have negatives. We don't have negatives in terms of they're very respectful. And they don't cross the boundaries, if there are boundaries. I don't, I don't have boundaries as such, but like, I've never had a parent come in roaring now and tearing into a classroom roaring his head off or anything like that with a teacher. Or sometimes I've had a couple of little difficult conversations but nothing, nothing at all in fact . . . You see, wherever they're culturally coming from, they are and I don't know how they perceive me really because I remember a parent.....and he you know made the child kneel down. The things they do. And I, and he says 'this woman could be your granny.' And I said 'thanks very much'. But do you know what I mean? Their perception you see."**

This quote identifies key differences between School A and School B. School B have not had the experience where they perceive parents to be crossing 'the boundaries' and have a feeling of respect from the parents. The Principal in School B identifies this solely to do with their cultural perspective. From the researcher's perspective the Principal contributes to this dynamic by attempting to approach parents first and foremost from a position of respect. She works with the parents by taking them from where they are at. Undoubtedly it may be easier to maintain that position in a context that is less challenging on the professional

boundaries in a school. School A have had a number of challenging experiences in relation to parents and have adopted a particular approach to that which appears to focus on ensuring that parents are 'well managed' and that a cohort of particular parents are encouraged to take on lead roles around the school. This also contributes to the dynamic that has been created. There is less of a sense of taking parents 'where they are at' in School A and more a sense of identifying how it should be and moulding parents into it.

The Principal in School B did not appear to think that their situation with parents would change anytime soon. The Principal, Home School Liaison and the parent from the African background appeared to be accepting of this as something that would be an on-going feature of their school Community and that would take quite a long time to change. The Principal spoke of the school 'managing change' but this focused more on the emergency set up, the impact of the circumstances that led to some of the families moving to Ireland, the move to the new school etc. There is currently no strategy around managing the cultural change that would address this cultural element to School B's parental involvement.

The "text a parent" was mentioned as a communication mechanism by three participants but did not appear to be utilised as much as in School A, where all participants spoke about it. The Principal spoke about using the school journal as a communication tool identifying that the school tries to focus on positive feedback in the journals as well as items for parents to address in terms of homework and behaviour. This didn't feature in any of the other interviews. There were different perceptions regarding the school newsletter. The parents identified that the newsletter was a general newsletter with just everything in it that was going on and very little about parents. The Home School identified that

even though it can be a short newsletter at times that there are parent sections in it.

There are currently no formal feedback structures in School B outside of the annual parent teacher meetings. The Principal spoke about the initial school welcome meeting that she and the Home School would attend with the Class Teacher. No other participant referenced these meetings when asked about feedback meetings and it was all informal communication that was highlighted.

The ET representative on School B's BOM who is also a parent in School B generally talks about her perception for the need for improved communication. She identifies the need for supporting parents to be involved and to be heard in a way that does not make teachers defensive and also in a way that promotes mutual understanding for the demands of the professional role while ensuring the parent can be involved and heard.

**"I think again it's like working with different cultures that you know as I said if you have a group of cultures that perhaps are fearful around confronting a teacher around an issue that they might feel concerned about or discussing something em then the only way around that is to support them and to let them know there are supports there if they had an issue that they would be heard and that we would certainly work together on it.**

**I think that needs to be reiterated in pretty much, I mean let's face it the teachers have the INTO the TUI the DES the staff have should I say, the BOM have an element of support there as well, parents don't have anybody, that is the bottom line, they don't have anybody. The NPC is there and its great if you want to pick up the phone but with regards to any, if you want to say official support they don't have any. There is not one governing body out there that will actually support parents . . . but also to realise that it can be at the other end of the extreme aswell now that I am thinking about it the parents can't necessarily at times see the demands that are put on the teachers and on the school system as well so the expectations are put on them as well I mean let's face it teachers**



**these days need to be more than just teachers. And I think that for parents it is important that they understand that as well and that generally they are doing their best, they are doing their best for those parents children . . . it needs to be openly discussed.”**

The need for two way dialogue and reflection on each other's role in relation to the child in school is also evident in this quote and how if this was facilitated it could increase understanding and appreciation of teacher role and parent role.

School A and School B share some of the same challenges around Communication e.g. capacity to establish meaningful two way feedback structures, time for structured feedback, time for planning/review and staff/parent discussion, availability of parents, capacity to prioritise parental involvement as part of staff discussion. There are also some significant differences: School A's approach is more structured and they appear to have developed more communication mechanisms. School B are more flexible in terms of giving time to parents without an appointment and ensuring that the parents 'feel heard'. School B face significant challenges in terms of the number of languages that exist in the families that attend their school and are currently experiencing language and culture as a barrier to involvement. School A has had some negative experiences with parents and school discussion can focus on 'managing difficulties'. There is an evident underlying respect for all parents in School B whereas the researcher did form the opinion during the process in School A that there was a particular type of parent that was welcomed to be involved. This could however be linked to the lack of negative experiences in School B or it could be due to the emphasis placed on parental involvement in the Educate Together model.

There is a sense of different values systems influencing leadership practices and approaches to Communication in School A and School B.

The schools' own awareness around their contribution to the dynamic that emerges may require some time for reflection. Also further research would be required to establish if the approaches are influenced by changes in parent behaviour particular in School B in relation to parents asserting themselves more or 'crossing those boundaries'. The researcher has formed the view that the ET ethos coupled with the Principal's approach would probably lead to the school again taking the parents where they are at and responding to what is newly emerging.

### **Decision making**

As identified in Chapter 1 and the presentation of some of the extant data below, legislation and policy in Ireland provides for parents to be involved in decision -making through the Board of Management, for the school to support the formation of a Parents Association and for parents to be involved in policy making within the school.

The National Parents Council (NPC) identifies Parent Associations (PA) as the structure through which parents/guardians in a school can work together for the best possible education for their children. The role of the PA is established in the Education Act 1998. The NPC identify the following in relation to Parent Associations on their website:

- The Parent Association works with the principal, staff and the board of management to build effective partnership of home and school.
- Educational research on the involvement of parents in schools shows that children achieve higher levels when parents and teachers work together.
- The Parent Association can advise the principal and Board of Management on policy issues and incidents that may require a review of school policy, e.g. Bullying, Safety, Homework, Enrolment, Behaviour problems etc.
- Parent Associations can suggest and/or organise extra-curricular activities.

- The Parent Association is a support for parents in the school.
- The Parent Association can invite speakers to address the parents on issues, which are topical or relevant.
- The Parent Association is not a forum for complaint against either an individual teacher or parent. The Complaints Procedure is the mechanism for this.

The composition of a school Board of Management is prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills. This should include eight members with the following breakdown of membership: 2 Patron nominees, 2 Teacher Representatives, 2 Parent Representatives, 2 Community Representatives. There should be a male and a female parent representative. In an Information Manual on Primary Boards of Management from the DES, it clearly states that

***“Board members are not delegates of their electorates. They have no obligation to report back to their electors or to take instruction from them on how to vote at a Board meeting. Such reporting may be a breach of the confidentiality requirement of the Constitution. It is a matter for each Board to decide what may be reported and in this respect, it is advisable that personnel, financial and personal matters should be treated as strictly confidential unless otherwise decided by the Board.”***

The interface between the Parents Association and the Board of Management is clear in the lines it should not cross. However, how the Parents Association, the Board of Management, the Principal or the parent representatives on the Board of Management interact around issues of discussion emerging for parents requires thought and some amount of process in each school site. This could be an initial piece of work for developing Parents Associations in both schools.

## **School A**

Decision- making and policy-making are the two areas that the parents were least involved in from the majority of participants' perspectives. A consultation process was described around the behaviour policy by both parents and staff members. This appears more to be about consultation than involvement in active decision making or negotiating elements of the policy. It also appeared to be completely school led.

The following are some examples of how participants referred to parental involvement in decision-making.

***“To a limited degree. Well I’ll tell you my understanding, how policies are made is that policies are brought to the Board for review and approval. I see a very limited contact for, for parents’ input into the pre-process under which those policies are brought. Okay so they’re generally circulated as, ‘this is the policy’.***

When asked about where the work on the policies comes from:

***“The school staff”***

Community Rep from BOM

***“Em I suppose we haven’t been very good at consistently involving them in making decisions. And eh that’s mainly because in the early days we didn’t have a huge parent body and those parents we had really weren’t interested in being involved at that level. This is the first year that we’ve actually had a cohort of parents. We have 5-7 parents, we now have for the first time a Parents Association em who are really solid parents who, who don’t have hidden agendas about their involvement in the school you em . . . like there was one big decision around the behaviour policy and we called a big meeting and the Deputy and Assistant Principal interviewed them, we had interviewed the children and got their responses, we sent home a survey to the parents and the parents came back and they fed back the content . . . but we need to be doing that really for every big policy.”***

Principal

The management evidently recognise the gap in terms of involving parents in active decision making. The Principal's value judgements in terms of the 'type of parent' that can be involved in decision making is apparent again here. In terms of the methodologies used to consult about the behaviour policy it is possible that it only facilitates a certain 'profile of parent' i.e. one that is comfortable with surveys and attending 'big meetings'.

The management disagree in terms of why parents are not more involved and unlike the Principal, the Community Representative on the Board sees the initial period as a lost opportunity to involve parents in the early days

**"Well I'll tell you what, I think there was, there was a potential real opportunity because it's a new school, and it was a small school, to have, there was a real , and I think could still be a real opportunity to have a genuine partnership between parents and the school because I think big schools just have to get on with the job, like it's like it's a bit of a machine, you have to get it done. While, while I think there was a real opportunity at the beginning here to build a new process. I think we missed that a little bit, eh and some of that is about the situational stuff, where we are in that traditionally parents don't necessarily either feel an interest or want to get involved or feeling that they have an opportunity to get involved, a combination of that."**

Community Representative on BOM

This may be linked again to School A being particular in terms of the type of parent they would like to be involved. The Principal speaks about coaching her teachers around 'a cohort of 2 to 3 (and 4 if they are very lucky) parents' that they should target for initiatives and working with.

The limited involvement of the parents in decision making in the school is evident in the parent participants' responses detailed below. The parents sense of their own role in policy and decision making is quite

striking here. The BOM parent representative who while feeling heard, identifies that there are some issues about which her views are taken on and others where they are not i.e. 'right or wrong issues'.

When asked if parents were involved in decision making in the school  
**Am not too sure now . . . I think we are but . . . (laughs).**

When asked if she felt like she was

**Yeah like they constantly last year just asked the parents opinion on what they thought should be in the rule book or what shouldn't be in the rule book.**

When asked if she felt her opinion had been taken on board?

**Yeah well I haven't seen the finished handbook yet, so, (laughs)**

When asked about policy making in the school?

**I don't really think the parents can really do anything about that. That's a Board of Management thing isn't it?**

Parent

***"I wouldn't have much to do with that, like. I just, yes, they'd, they'd listen to my feedback but, at the same time like, it's whether it's a right or wrong issue or a wrong issue as such. You know what I mean, like?"***

Okay. That's interesting. And can you give me an example of a right or a wrong issue?

***"Um, no. It's just an issue came up about, um, coloured people. And I brought it to the Board, like, because the Principal was getting slack over it saying that she treated the black kids more than the white kids and I felt real bad and uptight over it, like, because, um they just 'No, we'll talk about it later'. So when I did talk about it, now, they did, they did—they did listen to what I had to say but I felt I came out of the meeting none the wiser."***

Parent Representative on Board of Management

The last issue referenced here occurred at the Board of Management meeting that was observed as part of this research process. The participant raised the issue and was requested to wait to discuss it under enrolment as there had been some tensions around enrolment in relation to indigenous Irish families in the Community and those

children coming from African families. The issue was talked about at the meeting but nothing was resolved. In checking back with the participant about whether she was clear about how to respond to what other parents were saying to her or that the school would respond in some way she explained that she requested a meeting with the Principal to discuss it. According to the participant, at this meeting the Principal identified some of the things she had done around the issue and that sometimes you needed to be 'thick skinned' in these situations. The participant identifies

***"I don't feel that the issue was resolved. It probably got lost in all of the business around the President's visit and all the rest of it. And like the Principal said like, um 'it's a new Board, a new Parents Association. When everything is running smoothly, come next year everything will be sorted out as such'. But I don't know. I'm still in two minds whether it is being resolved or isn't. You know? Because I take, parents, it's still coming up in parents' conversations. Like, 'All the blacks get everything'. It's annoying because it's not resolved. I don't know whether it is true or not because people are saying yes, the Principal has often done it and like I am saying well I don't think she's like that."***

Parent Representative on the Board

This issue is relevant for this research in terms of how it relates to involving parents in school decision making and in how the 'leading' of this occurs. It also flags up questions around the scope of the role of the Parents' Representative on the Board, the capacity of the current Parents' Association, the link, or disconnect, between the Parents Association and the Board, processes used around 'managing the parents' and the participant in relation to the discussion around it. Some of these will be explored and discussed later. More generally it identifies an emerging challenge and opportunity for the school, in terms of responding to questions, discussions and feelings at Community level.

There were other examples of a lack of parental involvement in decision making and policy making e.g. a couple of participants spoke about some of the parents' unhappiness with the uniform. This was identified by both parents and the school staff. It was also widely acknowledged throughout the interviews that the school currently writes the school policies. As mentioned above the behavioural policy seems to have had an element of 'consultation' to it but not active decision-making. Some of the parents are happy for the school to take the lead on these areas and 'trust' them and see it actually as what they do. Other parents would like more of a role but are waiting patiently for the Parents Association to be more developed and also for themselves to acquire more confidence and length of time in their roles before they can become stronger and more vocal. This can be seen in the issue raised about Sport's Day, identified in Chapter 3.

### **Decision making—Power and position**

Despite there not being clear, structured and documented practice in terms of parental involvement, clear roles in relation to it and demonstration of 'power and position' did emerge from the data.

The HSCL role is clearly focused on targeting parents who may not be engaging with the school and who the school have identified as in need of building relationships with. This is achieved through a) home visits, b) referring families with particular needs to services within the area, c) identifying the content of courses and ensuring the courses, based in the school parents room, are established and delivered, d) supporting the development of the Parents Association and e) acting as a general contact point in relation to parents in the school. The HSCL role is key in terms of relating and the two Epstein caring synonyms 'trust and respect'. The Principal has an expectation that there would be a strategic element to



the role also. The individual is only in the role since September 2010 and it was evident that the focus currently is the operational elements and particularly that the Parents Association is developed.

In discussing the Parents' Association in context of leadership the HSCL explains:

***“Because they actually are involved, I mean raffles and musicals and they do help out, cake sales in particular the Parents Association, once we set up the first event that we have had eh eh that the Parents had to do was the cake sale for Haiti which was a few weeks ago and they had a very hands on approach. I mean they were fantastic, so . . .”***

When the development of the Parents' Association was being discussed the researcher asked the HSCL Co-ordinator:

*Can I just ask the PA was that a HSCL led thing OR a parent led thing?*

***“It was a combination of both. I had parents come to me, this was something that was spoken about last year with Muinteoir Aoife when she was HSCL but it wasn't set up so it was always one of my goals to get parents more involved you know . . . more responsibility”***

The power dynamic in School A appears to be impacted greatly by the strength of the Principal, her opinions and value judgements, some negative historical experiences with parents and a lack of a Parents Association (PA) until very recently. The PA is relatively new and is still in its early stages of development. Only one parent spoke about the PA as an opportunity to address issues or to discuss areas of differences of opinion. It will take some time to ascertain if this structure can engage in a 'powerful' way within the school system. The Principal identifies her role as going in to the PA to 'sort things out'. Hopefully there will be enough time given and power 'shared' to facilitate a two way dialogue in

this situation. However given that the PA has initially been driven and to some degree led by a school staff member i.e. HSCL it may be difficult to change the power dynamic in the near future.

## **School B**

Parents in School B, similarly to parents in School A have been involved very little in decision making and policy making in the school. The school and one of the parents attribute this mainly to the inconsistent and currently inactive Parents Association, language barriers and cultural differences in terms of how parents view their role in the school and a lack of confidence.

When asked if parents are involved in decision making in the school:

**“Parents Association yeah but like generally I think parents go along with what they’re given. The problem also is that it’s the cultural thing that is a problem . . . just like leave everything to the teachers-it’s the teachers job, that kind of thing . . . the school have tried, different sorts of things but I think it boils down to culture and it will take a long way.”**

Parent

**“On the Board there’s a parent representative but I’d say that’s as far as it would go.”**

When asked about policy making

**“The same again—on the Board they, kind of do the policies**

Class Teacher

**“They need to be more involved. Needs to be a greater involvement. You see, at the moment, we’ve a very weak parents’ association, as in, it’s non-existent. So uh you know it’s, it’s, trying to we were try trying to get that built up again and speak to parents about that. Um but again we tried doing it from a like it was u difficult finding parents that would drive it. So we tried leading it from inside the**

**school. But it didn't really work because it fell back to the school. It fell back to teachers again, and the parents withdrew more so. So uh it's trying to target a group of parents that will drive it on their own."**

Home School

**"now, decision making in the school. To what extent would they be involved? Well, like, if, when we would have a meeting or any kind of meetings, we always listen. We would listen. Or if, when they'd be engaging at different levels say the parent-teacher meetings and the, the teachers would always feedback and they'd say 'Oh, such a parent said such a thing'. But there isn't, um, well, again, we invite them to come, as I say, to the parent meetings and that, Parent Association meetings and that, but I like—or even when I, we'd always, like, make sure, I'd be always standing out in the morning, like. We do have an informal contact. And you'd always have chats and that. But it's not, you see, there's a huge language barrier as well with a lot of ours . . . well the policy making I suppose there is one parent on the Board of Management . . . you'll be meeting her today she is very involved . . . And we've other parents on the Board, now, the African parents and the—yes. They're, they're, kind of, don't understand the system that well. And no matter what way you try to explain, they still don't seem to really get it. They, we'd need a lot of kind of training. But they'd still, now, they're getting more confident I suppose. They're probably getting a bit more confident. General policy as regards the curricular policy, they 're not involved."**

Principal

The informal nature of the parental involvement is again evident in this quote from the Principal, as is the school's willingness to relate and to listen. However this will not translate into decision making without a clear and appropriate strategy to address the current perceived challenges i.e. language barriers, confidence, knowledge of how the system works, requirement for training. If the PA were affiliated to the NPC they would have access to the training they provide, as would the BOM. However the school's reluctance to support this development for fear it become school led may impact how long it might take for this to happen.

The parent participants have some different perceptions in relation to the lack of parental involvement in policy development:

**“School are trying but they just take what they are given. They don’t question it really. You know we tried some time ago in Parents Association you know, it’s a big issue the parents involvement, it is you know.**

Parent

**“It’s like they are leaving a lot up to the school, the parents are like well the school will look after that. And I suppose I don’t know if they necessarily feel that they can contribute so it’s really encouraging their confidence around their contributions you yes you can, come along and give your views in fact we want it you know. Because like it would be helpful for them and helpful for the Board”.**

Parent, ET rep on BOM

### **Decision making—power and position**

Similarly to School A there is no clear, structured and/or documented practice in terms of parental involvement in School B. However the roles are less clear in School B, with a sense of an ‘all hands on deck’ approach evident and a blurring between the HSCL role and the Principal. This could be explained by the dual role carried out by the HSCL as she is also the Assistant Principal. The demonstration of ‘power and position’ manifested itself differently in School B with a focus on gaining trust and building relationships rather than ‘controlling’ and ‘managing parents’ although the level of openness of the school to parents was perceived differently by different participants. The Principal attempts to address openly the social issues of domestic violence and Child Protection which appear to be connected to the cultural differences identified in the school. This is also a feature of the interview with

Interviewee 1 in the next Chapter. The Principal, each year, at the start of year meeting describes how things used to be in Ireland and how she herself was slapped and looked after by siblings but that is no longer acceptable in Irish society. The researcher formed the opinion during the research that this was an attempt to proactively deal with issues that have been an on-going feature of school life since the inception of the school. It could be argued that this is the Principal taking her power and influence too far but this is not the sense that the researcher developed during this process. Further research in School B would be required to firmly establish that however.

Like School A, the HSCL role is focused on targeting parents who may not be engaging with the school and who the school have identified they need to build relationships with through home visits and to encourage them into the school. The budget for the school courses has been cut and that appears to have impacted on the effort being invested in running them currently. The HSCL strongly advocated that it was not her role, or the school staff's, to support the development of a Parents Association and that it needed to be parent-led. The Principal's role was very much linked to the HSCL in terms of supporting targeted families or families with particular needs who might be engaging with services within the area. There is a lack of strategic thinking about the roles and a 'hands-on' and operational approach is evident.

The Parents Association is currently not operating and it appears that the school, having already attempted to support it once, will wait for some key parents to drive it.

The power dynamic in School B appears to be impacted greatly by the cultural challenges it currently experiences. Whether these are perceived or actual, the cultural differences in relation to how the parents view and

interact with the school, are acting as a barrier to meaningful, active and engaged parental involvement. As identified earlier in the Chapter there are differences in opinion as to how that could be addressed.

### **Leaders, leading and leadership in the area of Parental Involvement**

The Principal's role clearly sets the tone for the parental involvement in the school. This was clear from the research in School A, School B and the overarching interviews also. The overarching interviews strongly suggest that the success of parental involvement in a school starts and ends with the Principal. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

It was evident from both schools that priority on matters directly related to school curriculum, learning and behaviour takes precedent over matters relating to parental involvement. Despite the well documented connection and an 'on the ground' acknowledgment of the connection of these two spheres there is little evidence of the leadership leading the schools in this way by actively planning for how parental involvement can support the learning and behaviour, by having a vision for the development of parental involvement or by working at Board level to develop a school policy or statement of intention around this.

In School A there is an acknowledgement that the Principal did drive work around parental involvement in the early days i.e. before a Home School Liaison Co-ordinator was allocated. The Principal's values and opinions in relation to areas of disadvantage and parent behaviour appears to heavily influence her approach to parental involvement and the parameters and autonomy that the PA or the HSCL will be afforded. There appears to be a lack of vision or leadership in relation to parental involvement outside of the legislative requirements, WSE measures and task based elements like parent involvement in celebrations. There is

undoubtedly an expressed wish for it but it involves a small cohort of **‘solid parents’**. Also the description of the Principal’s role in relation to the Parents Association, the Parent Reps on the Board and her management of the HSCL all suggest that there is a heavy control element to the leadership in relation to parental involvement. In discussing leading parental involvement in School A the Principal identifies some key points from her perspective.

When asked who in her view was leading Parental Involvement

***“Well it’s really a combination but it is my duty to keep it on the front burner the whole time. And to make sure that, because there are a pile of purposes in school it’s to ensure that it is on the agenda at every staff meeting, sometimes there are issues arising sometimes there aren’t so I try to give R (HSCL) a few minutes at a meeting or every 2<sup>nd</sup> monthly meeting to fill us in and we particularly induct any new teachers specifically on our approaches to parental involvement.*”**

The Principal was the only participant that identified that parental involvement was an agenda item at staff meetings.

In relation to the induction of new or training of young teachers she identifies

***“well the way we say it to them is to the young teachers is that from day 1 be watching out for what we call your critical mass of parents. Everybody will have it in their classroom, out of 18 or 20 kids you might have 3, you’ll be lucky to have 3 but you’ll definitely have 1, you might have 2 and if you have 3 you are lucky. And they are the parents who will chat to you, to give you good eye contact, they are the parents who are confident in themselves and maybe it’s a parent with a particular*”**

***skill and there are the parents that you'll be going to if you ever need anything done . . . so I say to teachers start developing a good relationship with those parents . . . Because I always say to them no 1, it's for 2 reasons on a micro level for yourself if you are going to have that class for a year or 2 it's great to know that there a 2 or 3 parents that I can call on to do things in class with me but on a macro level then going forward there are these group of parents who will eventually be 8 years in the school and we need to capacity build and we need them to know that we want them to do that and if the door keeps closing on them they won't want to come back and help out and do the 'skivvy' things. I always say to the teacher right the days of parents just coming in and doing the teas and this is long gone, like we need to be getting more involvement in the education end of things as well."***

#### **Principal**

This quote clearly demonstrates the Principal's commitment to the idea of identifying a small number of key individuals and developing a relationship with them in order that they will be involved. This is how she inducts her teachers and how the school is approaching parental involvement. As identified in Chapter 2 this is the type of approach Freire cautions against in terms of making sustainable and enduring change in Communities. It appears to be a common practice however in terms of ensuring tasks are completed and that the school can meet its requirements in terms of involving the parental body. This will be discussed further in the final Chapter.

The Principal identifies 'shared and distributed' as the words that best describe the leading of parental involvement. During this research process elements of tasks being shared and distributed were evident. However during the course of this research, the researcher has formed the view that the decision making around how parental involvement



occurs rests mainly with the management team and specifically the Principal. The HSCL was identified by the parents as a key person in terms of the leading of parental involvement and in terms of 'operationalising' the work around it, that is undoubtedly the case. However in terms of setting priority, boundaries and scope that appears to rest firmly with the Principal.

Some of the responses the Board of Management representative gives are insightful in this regard

*Who sets the agenda for parental involvement?*

***I'd say 90% the Principal and 10% the BOM and parents***

In discussing the roles of HSCL and the Principal and how that manifests in terms of the leading of parental involvement.

***The Principal runs the show. The Principal runs the show in all schools in my experience. And it's very good generally, you know what I mean, so it's her ethos and her values system, how she runs the school. Everyone follows that lead then.***

When asked if there was an accommodation of parents' views?

***I think there, there may be a notional one in terms of saying 'I think it's a good idea but whether then it translates into actual change, I would be doubtful. I think the language is there.'***

In terms of this research and its focus on parental involvement, leadership and inclusion, 'everyone following the Principal's lead', may be a positive thing if the vision, values and activity around Parental Involvement had been openly discussed, debated and agreed. This is not the case however and there is variance at a number of levels within the

school about what parental involvement should be, how it should be led and what it should look like.

The Principal in School B works differently and there is less of a sense of 'leadership' from her role in the school and more of one of 'facilitator'. At the start of the year she outlines clearly for parents her obligations in terms of the legalities around male behaviour with women and children and this is one of the few times she draws boundaries, instills expectations and identifies appropriate behaviour. As described earlier she gives something of herself and her historical context in this however and rather than it emerging from an attempt to assert her authority it appears more to be an attempt to 'relate' and 'identify' with parents who still engage in these practices. This contrasts with School A and she appears to spend a lot of her time responding to where parents are at, supporting them and building relationships. As identified in earlier quotes to come from a place of respect for the parents is critical for her. In terms of her leadership generally she identifies that she is non-directive and she promotes problem solving at teacher level and encourages them to do their own thinking on matters. It appears as if she promotes a school culture with low power distance.

In discussing the impact of the ET commitment to being democratically run and the impact of this on leading parental involvement she identifies

***"You see, I think my view of it is for the parents. I would love the parents to be involved more. But I'm still happy with the way they're involved. But what I think, you, you the about uh the parents participation in the daily life of the school, by the fact even the way the parents are treated. The openness. It's that kind of generosity that you have, that they are welcomed, that they are***

***valued as, as part of the child the extent—do you know that way it kind of its not them and us.”***

The Principal identifies the leadership approach as inclusive.

***“Inclusive would be it. We would try to be. But, I mean, in reality. We do what we can and I certainly wouldn’t be autocratic.”***

There was great variance in the style of leadership in relation to the Principals in both schools. In both schools there appeared to be a lack of leadership at Board level in relation to parental involvement, although the reasons for that are also very different. Parents on the ground in School A clearly identify the HSCL role as their ‘leadership’ while parents in School B identified the Principal. There are good intentions but a lack of clarity of intent and purpose in relation to parental involvement. There is a lack of internal structures to support the driving of this work at school and community level. The work in both schools is mainly at an operational level apart from in School A where there are priorities identified in the DEIS plan. As identified already however the HSCL is uninformed as to what they are and the plan was written by the Principal. There appears to be an impact of ET principles and ethos on the leadership in School B where there is an emphasis on context, respect, responding to school community as it exists. In School A there appears to be more of an emphasis on setting standards, creating a cohort of ‘suitable’ parents and instilling/imposing elements identified by the school as important. An example of this was referenced by a number of participants in relation to some dispute between the school and the parents during Communion preparation. The Board of Management representative identified this as a dichotomy between the school’s management team and how the Chair of the BOM, who is the local priest,

would approach the Community in his work. In his view this was mainly to do with ideological and philosophical differences.

***“Because, and this is a real, this is a real issue I think, is that there is a particular religious and philosophical ideology coming from the school which is very different from the Parish Team’s approach to the preparation for Holy Communion. Some of it’s about behaviour, some of it’s about expectations, some of it is about dress. My own view is that the school have a very structured traditional view as to the preparation for the Holy Communion. Whereas the Parish Team and Gerry would have, they would treat them, the parish as a mission parish and therefore would allow and tolerate a variety of participation . . . whereas the school would engender that everyone has to have a level of respect and deference.”***

Board of Management representative

In both schools commitment to parental involvement was verbalised. From this research it is clear that there is a need for a range of leadership supports, national level priority, local level discussions and process work to be implemented in order that it can be led beyond the ‘tea’ and the chat. This will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

### **Sources of inequality**

The research is set in a context of high levels of educational inequality in terms of traditional measures of educational outcomes. At the outset, the researcher was primarily motivated by and focused on the socio-economic elements of inequality. The impact of cultural and affective elements of inequality was highly significant in both schools.

As identified in Chapter 3, the Lynch and Lodge framework regarding sources of inequality was used in terms of the scaffolding of the research design. An analysis of the data relating to the four sources of inequality in each of the schools in relation to their awareness of inequality, efforts to prevent inequalities and strategies to address inequalities is presented below. Commentary and discussion on this will follow in Chapter 6.

Source of inequality	Source of inequality	Source of inequality	Source of inequality
<b>Distribution</b>	<b>Recognition</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>Affective</b>
Patterns of ownership, control, distribution, opportunities and consumption	Culturally based systems of recognition, non-recognition and misrecognition, status-related inequalities i.e. those arising from sexuality, religion, beliefs, ethnicity	In contexts where power is enacted, in realms of decision making, in systems of inclusion/exclusion in the exercise of power	Relations of dependency and interdependency, human beings are not just rational actors; they are also affective agents in social & political life
<p>Parental Involvement</p> <p>Legislative framework for opportunities to participate in school system as a parent i.e. Parents Association and BOM (links to recognition and representation)</p>	<p>Parental Involvement</p> <p>Legislative recognition in terms of the 'right' to be involved</p> <p>Gender recognition on formal representative structures i.e. one female, one male</p>	<p>Parental Involvement</p> <p>Legislative framework for how parents are to be involved in decision making i.e. policy development, Parents Association and BOM</p>	<p>Parental Involvement</p> <p>In areas of designated disadvantage emphasis placed on relationship building and connection with home and what might be occurring in the home through the HSCL role.</p> <p>The affective domain impacts on all of the other three</p>

			<p>roots—if there are issues of confidence, anger, emotional difficulties it could impact on a parent's and school staff's capacity to engage at these levels.</p>
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## **School A**

Source of inequality	Source of inequality	Source of inequality	Source of inequality
Distribution	Recognition	Representation	Affective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legislative framework not supported by DES in allocating time to school staff to planning and/or supporting parental involvement.</li> <li>School have struggled to develop a Parents Association but have maintained it as a priority. The first PA meeting occurred in January 2011 and is heavily supported by the HSCL role.</li> <li>BOM representation has been problematic—new reps bring new hope. ‘Management’ of these parents by the Principal and their</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School acknowledge legislative ‘right’ to be involved and have worked hard attempting to ensure legislative framework enacted</li> <li>Element of ‘the type’ of parent selected by the school to be involved</li> <li>Gender balance at Board of Management level achieved. Identified that it would be difficult ‘culturally’ for the ‘African daddies’ to be involved in day to day activities.</li> <li>Are tensions regarding the multicultural element to the school—some of the indigenous Irish population feel that the Principal favours the African families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School have not managed to meaningfully enact the legislative representative structures</li> <li>Decision making mainly occurs at management team level within the school where the parents have no voice</li> <li>The Board do not have a statement of intent or a clear strategy around parental involvement</li> <li>Parents have not been involved in policy making or decision making</li> <li>Parents were involved at consultation level around one policy—the behaviour policy. This was completely school staff led.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationship building carried out by the HSCL role identified by all participants as paramount. Identified particularly by the one parent identifying herself as ‘not involved’ in the school activities.</li> <li>A need for development of self-awareness regarding emotional management in relation to issues pertaining to parental involvement evident at all participant level. A particular need for this evident at management team level.</li> <li>Space and time for self-reflection for school staff in order that there is capacity to manage own emotions and respond to emotional needs of parents in a</li> </ul>



<p>contribution evident</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interface between PA and BOM unclear to participants and not supported effectively by national guidelines</li> <li>• Funding to join NPC</li> <li>• Power distribution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• View expressed of the value put on education by the African families</li> <li>• Recognition comes with 'great expectations'</li> </ul>		<p>developmental, positive and mutually beneficial way.</p>
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## **School B**

Source of inequality	Source of inequality	Source of inequality	Source of inequality
<b>Distribution</b>	<b>Recognition</b>	<b>Representation</b>	<b>Affective</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legislative framework not supported by DES in allocating time to school staff to planning and/or supporting parental involvement.</li> <li>Parents Association is currently inactive. Energy around it is low. HSCL identified that school did attempt to support it but it then became school-led so they have stepped back somewhat. Thos currently involved in attempting to reinvigorate it appear to have low energy around it.</li> <li>BOM representation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School acknowledge legislative 'right' to be involved and have worked hard attempting to ensure legislative framework enacted</li> <li>Cultural difference cited by every participant as a barrier currently. This included the participant from an African background. One of the other parents was more hopeful about the possibility of changing this.</li> <li>Ethnic and gender balance at Board of Management level achieved but levels of effectiveness and capacity for meaningful participation identified as</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School have not managed to meaningfully enact the legislative representative structures</li> <li>Decision making occurs at school level. There are no clear management structures and decisions appear to be made in quite an ad hoc way.</li> <li>The Board do not have a statement of intent or a clear strategy around parental involvement</li> <li>Parents have not been involved in policy making or decision making</li> <li>Parents were involved at consultation level around a policy on mobile phone use. This occurred following a Board discussion on the policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationship building is prioritised in School B. The Principal appears to be at the forefront of this. The HSCL emphasised home visits for those more marginalised parents with a focus on building confidence and levels of comfort around coming to the school.</li> <li>Emotional support offered by the Principal to those experiencing a range of issues e.g. serious violence before arriving in Ireland, questionable parenting methods, cultural gender differences.</li> <li>Space and time for self-reflection for professionals in order that the relationship building and emotional support can</li> </ul>

<p>appears to have been very problematic. Parental participation has been impacted by mental health issues, language barriers and clarity around role and scope to contribute. The ET rep on the BOM is also a parent and identified that she sometimes finds herself in dual role.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interface between PA and BOM unclear to participants and not supported effectively by national guidelines</li> </ul>	<p>a challenge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of languages cited as a serious barrier to developing parental involvement.</li> <li>• Recognition of all language/cultural backgrounds attending school currently occurring through monthly language promotion of the different languages involved.</li> </ul>	<p>where the ET rep suggested that all parents should have an opportunity to feed into the draft. The policy had been drafted at staff level and the ET rep felt that if she had not suggested bringing it back to the parents it would have been ratified at that Board meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to balance ‘accepting where things are’ for parents from other cultural backgrounds with a strategy around addressing capacity for their participation at Board level</li> </ul>	<p>continue and be sustainable and also be embedded in an overall strategic/planned school approach to parental involvement.</p>
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## **Conclusion**

This Chapter identifies that the two school's commitment to parental involvement in schools emerges mainly from the legislative framework and appears to focus on the establishment of a Parents' Association and the work driven by the HSCL role. The approach, value and belief system of the Principal is paramount in terms of the leading of the parental involvement. There is a difficulty prioritising parental involvement work in an already packed school agenda and a clear role for BOM's in ensuring that it is prioritised by Principals perhaps more focused on direct teaching and learning related activities. There is no formal recording of parental involvement in either School A or School B. The nature of the Parental Involvement in both schools focuses mainly on fundraising activities or 'helping out' roles in the school. Despite being embedded in organizing school activities in School A, parental involvement remains at a practical, task oriented level. The relationship approach in School B while facilitating inclusivity and positive interaction has not, as of yet, translated into involvement in decision making or policy making. Both schools are pursuing the strategy of identifying key parents in an attempt to develop a core group that will lead parental involvement.

The experience of both schools in relation to parents has been different in that School A has had some negative experiences around parent behavior. School B to date has not had these experiences. Also the cultural differences cited by both schools again are in contrast with each other: School A identifies that the African families value education more and are very respectful due to that, whereas School B identifies that the migrant families' view of the teacher as professional and their wish not to interfere as a barrier to achieving high levels of parental involvement. Some participants in School B did feel more could be done to ensure

parents understood where they could become involved. Also the social issues connected with the cultural differences appear to require a lot of the Principal's time in School B.

The sources of inequality analysis demonstrates that despite fulfilling their requirements in terms of the DES regarding ensuring there are parent representatives on the BOM, the attempts to develop a Parents Association and to ensure there are gender and ethnic representation, both schools have a lot of work to do in terms of addressing the potential sources of inequality. In School A this focuses largely on the affective and representative domains, although there are significant issues in the recognition and distribution domain also. In School B they fare better in the affective domain but have significant challenges in the other three.

The next Chapter presents findings in relation to the three overarching interviews and discusses them in relation to School A and B also.

## **Chapter 5—Presentation of Findings; The Overview Interviews**

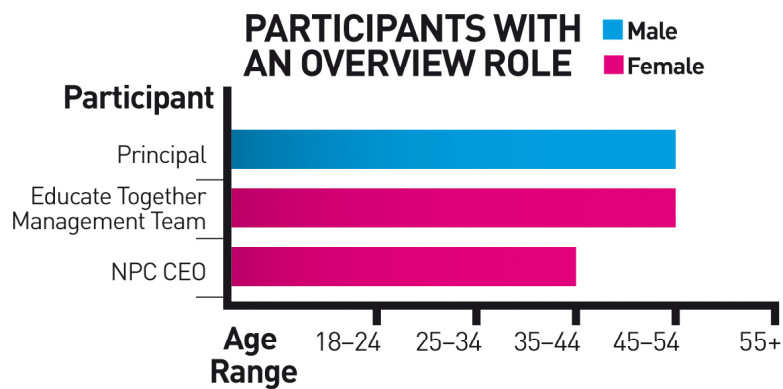
### ***“Let’s re-imagine . . . ”***

This Chapter focuses on the findings from the three ‘overarching level’ interviews around the aims of the research, as understood from a national level perspective. It then discusses the themes of Communication, Decision Making, Leadership and Equity/Equality, drawing on both the findings of these three interviews and the two school sites.

Semi-structured interviews were completed with a Principal external to the school sites with an expertise in school leadership. This Principal has experience of both models of patronage. Interviews were also carried out with the staff member on the Educate Together management team with responsibility for governance and leadership and the CEO of the National Parents Council.

For the purpose of presenting data from these interviews the participants are identified as follows:

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>
Principal with experience of both models of patronage and knowledge/expertise in school leadership	Interviewee 1
Staff member in Educate Together with responsibility for leadership and governance	Interviewee 2
CEO National Parents Council	Interviewee 3



**Fig : Participants with ‘overview’ roles**

From the three overarching interviews it appears that the commitment to parental involvement differs greatly across schools nationally and is primarily dictated by the Principal and/or the Board of Management’s view of it.

***“That varies dramatically from school to school. Em, it’s hard to go beyond that because it really does make such a difference. You can stand in front of a group of parents and be talking about parental involvement and it makes such sense to some of the parents in the room and parents in another school it’s like you’re talking about another country because it’s not what they experience at all.”***

Interviewee 3

When asked what are the key factors that contribute to high and/or low levels of parental involvement in ET schools, the response from the ET representative is somewhat ambiguous

***“Em, I think how the Principal views parental involvement and what they see parental involvement as. If they see it as limited to, eh, fundraising and em helping out eh then one of two things happens, either the Board goes along with the Principal and there is minimal eh structured eh boundaries to parental involvement em which the parents are happy with because they know where the boundaries are, it’s more traditional and they actually understand that. But the other thing that happens is you do get situations where the Board will fight that and you’ll have clashes between the Board and Principal around how its playing out in the school.”***

Interviewee 2

How Educate Together schools view parental involvement is important in terms of how it is built into what the composition of the school should look like and not simply an external measurement in relation to the DEIS plan or a Whole School Evaluation. It forms one of the four key principles of the organisation.

***“Yeah I do feel that when we ask ourselves at the end of the year are we being genuinely an Educate Together School we will use the extent to which parents are involved in our school as a barometer and I think other schools mightn’t. That mightn’t be a success criteria for other schools but I think we would see it as a success criteria.”***

Interviewee 1



There appears to be no formal recording of parental involvement across schools and the CEO of the NPC states that ***“if we were collecting levels my view would be it would be quite depressing, do you know?”***

The CEO of the NPC raises an important point around clarification of parental involvement in Ireland and its interpretation. She identifies that legally according to the constitution, parents are the primary educators. The word primary however has been interpreted differently and the lack of an agreed understanding of it may be leading to differences in terms of defining what parental involvement should be.

***“So some people say, oh well primary means they’re the first educators because the child comes from the parents and then for the first three or four years they’re the first educators but then the education system takes over. And then other people, including ourselves, would see primary educators as being the first and most important educator.”***

She describes how this can then influence welcome meetings with parents where schools define roles into ‘caring’ and ‘educational’, albeit very gently and nicely, with the parents being told to ensure their children can put on their coats, go to the toilet independently and open and close their lunchbox. This has been a common theme at the welcome meetings she has been invited to attend across the country.

***“But to me the underlying message there is for a parent your involvement now is care needs for your child and actually if you***

***get involved in the educational needs we might even have to undo that because you'll have done it wrong, do you know?"***

It would appear to be fundamental that there is clarity around the definition and scope of parental involvement and to ensure that all partners supporting the child's education are coming from the same place. There is obviously a need for a boundary around the 'professional educator' within this but until clarity is agreed around this definition, it is unlikely that there can be agreement or understanding around that boundary. One of the Educate Together principles goes some of the way towards addressing this by committing to schools that will be "*democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school, whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers*". Epstein also addresses this in calling for schools where caring takes place and homes where learning takes place and encourages us not to delineate in the manner described above. Her 'caring synonyms' in terms of the implementation of her 6 types of parental involvement are a demonstration in practice of how schools and families can do this.

Two of the three participants acknowledge the fundraising role parents have traditionally held in schools. Interviewee 1 asserts that he specifically requests that the Parents Association do not engage in on-going fundraising. He requests that they either through gaining sponsorship or through other initiatives contribute €4000 annually to four events that occur each year i.e. 'Human Rights month', 'Arts week', 'Feile na Gaelige' and 'Get Active week'. The PA in this school also have a policy task every year and scope to develop special projects. Interviewee 3 identifies that the emphasis of parental involvement on fundraising that she has observed across schools in Ireland is not unique to Ireland. In discussing a joint piece of work carried out by the IPPN and the NPC over a two year period, around how schools and parents can work better

together, she describes what happened when they presented it to a European Parents' conference with 26 countries represented.

***“We went and presented to something like 26 European countries and what was really interesting was when I was going through the bit of, the introduction bit and I was introducing it and I was saying you know ‘In Ireland when, when you go out to Parents’ Associations and you say your role is not to fundraise that’s not the purpose of a Parents Association and everybody nodded. So it’s not an Irish problem and it could be broader than then. But it, but the frustration in the room was exactly the same as that’s the only role we’re given in schools . . . and then following the conference the German National Parents Council asked us to go and speak in Germany . . . and Germany is broken up into federations so they all develop their own independent rules of each other yet it was the same throughout Germany. So it’s, I think that’s interesting in itself.”***

Interviewee 3

It is relevant to identify here that, when invited to present on this project, the Irish NPC insisted on the Principals attending the European conference with them as the model of work had been a collaborative one with the IPPN. When the German National Parents Council requested a presentation specifically the NPC again had to encourage them to invite Principals. The CEO of the NPC identifies that this is paramount ***“on the basis that if you’re giving this message both sides need to hear the message”***. The opportunity for dialogue that this created was identified as one of the major successes of this meeting and re-iterates the importance of creating opportunity for ‘dialogical processes’. It is interesting that discussion in the interview with Interviewee 2 focused more on the scope of parental involvement and differentiating for schools and parents between ‘parental access’ and ‘parental involvement’. A

limited role in relation to fundraising did not emerge in the context of this interview.

In relation to the aim of this research: to establish the relevance and use of best practice in engaging the parents and informing the work generally with the parents in the schools, all three participants in this part of the research process were familiar with different pieces of research in relation to leadership and/or parental involvement. The NPC are currently looking at Epstein's model of practice and have recently adapted their training for parents to reflect her work. Best practice strategies in terms of leadership and parental involvement has not yet been prioritised by the DES in terms of ensuring that the composition of school BOM's has the capacity to consider them and/or act on them or that the school staff have access to such research and can accommodate the recommendations in their daily work.

### **Communication**

Communication was a theme that again emerged from each of these three interviews. It emerged through discussion on defining parental involvement, the structures to support parental involvement, addressing challenges around parental involvement and best practice in relation to parental involvement.

The Principal practitioner with expertise in school leadership is very clear that creating a space for parents to chat with teachers or the Principal is vitally important to creating and maintaining parental involvement. In identifying the four spheres of Parental Involvement operating in his school the importance of it is clear 1) Parents Association 2) **Access and Time** 3) Home School Education Programmes (around DEIS priorities) 4) Parental Support around DEIS. In relation to implementing sphere two, the Principal is always present in the yard for the school drop off in the

morning and allows a further thirty minutes for any issues or follow up that is required by any parent to have discussion with him. He encourages the teachers to engage with the parents in the moment and they support each other to ensure that this can happen, e.g. a resource teacher covering for a class teacher so a conversation can occur. It is only if this conversation does not resolve the issue or it emerges that an issue requires more time that an appointment is made.

The approach and rationale for this is in stark contrast to what occurs in School A where there is a sense of this morning availability of the Principal being implemented to protect teachers and 'manage parents'. The sense of openness with this Principal is similar to School B but there is much more structure and sense of it fitting with a wider strategy and vision for parental involvement. It also appears to be less reactive, ad hoc and part of an overall plan. The 'emergency' status of School B could explain some of this.

In discussing her role as a support to ET schools around leadership and governance, Interviewee 2 identifies on-going open communication amongst all of the partners as the most important element for a school to achieve.

***“Em people come to me and complain about stuff so that’s fine so then you have to go and deal with it. A lot of the time, for something like that, for instance, it would be me saying to the Principal, ‘Well maybe if you tried this or maybe you probably need to talk to them about that’. You need to, you need to get, my answer to nearly everything, you need to get a discussion going around this and you need to make sure that people understand why you’re doing this and because I honestly believe that if you put forward your, your rationale for something either people will see***

***that it makes sense and go okay, oh okay I don't like it but fine or you'll be given arguments that actually make you change your mind and think well okay I am being unreasonable about that I see where they're coming and you know my thing would be to discuss it out, make an, a thing for discussions be open about it, be willing to change and always be willing to give something a try."***

This approach to communication has implications in terms of access, confidence, 'power distance', flexibility and capacity for a Principal to reflect and see another way. It also has implications in terms of support to a Principal to do that reflection with an already packed schedule. Currently, through this research process, the researcher has developed the view that this may not currently be possible in School A primarily due to issues of 'power distance', relationship, levels of confidence and an emerging profile of 'a fitting parent' through the research process. In School B where the leadership presents as more open and trusting of the parent population, it is unlikely to happen due to the cultural issues identified by all of the participants and the school's response to those issues.

There are cultural issues in terms of communication at play in both schools and this also emerged as a theme in each of the overview interviews. Some of this has to do with a cultural difference or a different cultural experience of the education system both in School A and School B. In School A this pertains to both the 'African families' and their approach in terms of leaving the professionals to get on with their jobs and the value they put on the education of their children. There is also a cultural element at play in terms of parents originally from the area in School A, who had some negative experiences of school and who position themselves in a particular way in terms of their child's education. Some of this has to do with their levels of confidence, communication style,

language use, their value judgements. Coupled with the value judgements of the Principal and the approach to the management of this it presents as a school-culture that is designed by the school management team and that parents will either fit into or be uninvolved with. In School B the cultural and language differences are cited as a major barrier to involvement. Some participants indicated that parents don't want to be involved as they are unused to this approach while some indicate that the school needs to ensure parents know how they can be involved. There is however in School B a sense of them working with the parents they have and attempting to build relationships and understanding in order that they can work better together.

The cultural issue is something that the research participants with a national brief are very well aware of. The NPC having had so many calls on the issue sourced funding to carry out a migrant parent research project, in one area of the country with particularly high levels of migrant parents, to address some of the challenges. They initially thought that the language barrier was the major issue and used some of the funding for interpreters for a drop-in service in some of the schools:

***“One of the biggest things we found out was that actually language is not a big barrier at all. We brought in interpreters, and it might have helped parents initially coming to the school because they might not have had the confidence in their grasp of the English language to make that cross against the door. But once they were in they didn't want to use the interpreter because they had enough English to speak and that slowed the process down . . . and it was interesting you know because before we went into it we consulted widely with groups that were in the area and they were constantly saying biggest issue is language barrier, biggest issue is language barrier. And then the other things we'd hear is like you know it's a***

***cultural difference because these people come from countries where education isn't a right and just the fact that they have their children in school is enough for them, they don't want to be involved. Well we just didn't find that at all . . . everything that the parents of the children in this project brought up are exactly the same as the parents that were on our helpline . . . how to be involved in the PA in the school and em how to be more involved in their children's learning.***

Interviewee 3

According to the CEO of the NPC the issues identified by schools in general and by School B in this research as solely to do with cultural differences e.g. the boundary around the professional role of a teacher and not feeling like they can interfere, has been an issue for the majority if not all the parents she has engaged with in her time in the NPC.

***“But I don't know whether that's to do with em from foreign countries I think that's just all parents. And you know that's an issue for all parents I mean I, I speak to like very middle/upper class parents who won't go into the school front gate. They're back to being eight years old and talking to the Principal and do you know, but that obviously affects all parents as some level but it affects some parents to a degree that mans they can't go across the school gate at all.”***

Interviewee 1 identifies some of the practical, on the ground impact of having such a diverse population of parents.

***“Well you know I think ET is set up optimistically. You know and not foolhardy optimistically I think genuinely and really properly optimistic. Em, I do feel you know I do feel that socio economic***



**disadvantage is very hard to address by school alone and I do feel that eh you em there are religious and cultural practices to which many of our parents belong that is only going to serve gender equality very poorly . . . like equality of sexual identity, eh very poorly. We have a lot of parents belong to churches in particular that are eh like that are em very homophobic . . . em I feel that em there's dysfunction from a variety of sources going on in the lives of a lot of our families that em makes for em makes for traumatised mothers and traumatised children and you know em that can be on occasions overwhelming for them . . . we, we have parents here who experience violence on a daily , children who experience violence on a daily basis."**

This resonates with School B in the needs that are presenting for them and the type of response the Principal makes to these parents. It raises questions with regard to School A in that the discussion around the international families focused mainly on how much they valued the education that was provided for the children but that they would not really be involved in the school apart from attending celebrations. This appeared to make for a more contented relationship with these parents. Further research in School A would be required to probe deeper into the social and emotional challenges for these families that were very apparent in the ET schools.

## **Decision Making**

**Interviewee 1** identifies a process operating in his current school that clearly aims to support an element of parental involvement in decision making. The Principal defines the scope of parental involvement through his aforementioned four spheres and one of those involves participation in decision making/policy making. There is clarity on the role of the Parents Association and their functions in relation to the school. It is

interesting to note that Interviewee 1 stresses the importance of the NPC training for a well-functioning PA. This interview suggests a strong leader, committed to a dialogue with parents and teachers but one who also firmly and assertively makes decisions. There is however scope for the parents to be involved in decision making and as already mentioned the Parents' Association has an assigned policy task each year. In referencing a proposal from the Parents Association to revise the Anti-Bullying policy he identified this as a strength, ***“people do feel that they had, they’ve had a say in it.”*** This involved a discussion that went back and forth between the PA and the teaching staff until the policy reflected the elements the parents requested.

The Parents also have some freedom around identifying special projects every year. However the Principal exerts some conditions around these initiatives

***“They also are given some freedom with regards to developing, eh, projects in the school that they want to develop, but em, again I said to them that they are projects that they have to do then, like we are not short of ideas but these are projects that have to be kind of if you like—started, implemented and concluded—eh by themselves in keeping with school standards . . . eh like this year they took on to eh make sure that there was a big parental turnout at our Sports Day and there was, it was the best turn out of parents we’ve ever had and it was simply word of mouth.”***

This Interviewee expresses the importance of meaningful parental involvement in decision making and indicated that feedback to date has been that parents do not feel it is tokenistic. He attributes this not to his style of leadership but to the Educate Together ethos

***“I’d say nearly every Educate Together school I know eh, this is what the school leader is trying to do in it and they, maybe they’ve nuanced ways of doing it but certainly I would feel that it is part of what we do.”***

He also identifies that he is aware of a number of schools under Catholic patronage who have excellent ‘parental involvement’. This Interviewee has experience of working in schools under both types of patronage.

## **Interviewee 2**

This interview highlights the ET approach to ensuring that the Parents Associations in ET schools are fit for purpose. In working with a Start-Up group of parents they promote the idea of waiting until the second year to actually initiate the Parents Association due to the level of work for year one. However they encourage parents to do the training with the NPC and actively encourage Boards of Management to facilitate this

***“We would be saying to them, ‘Don’t open a Parent Association in your first year because you’ll have so much to do and you’re so small . . . find your feet. Any parents interested in forming a PA go to the NPC, eh and join up with other schools to do the training . . . if they can’t join with other schools in the area then we, we advise the Board to pay for it and to get your cohort of trained parents with an aim of starting up a Parents Association the following year’. And there are two main reasons for that. One is that I think that, eh, it is important to have a Parents Association but I think it’s important that everybody knows that its being set up properly and it gives parents a chance to see what they want to do with it, to discuss it, em and to tease it out”.***

Given the emphasised role on Parents' Association regarding parental involvement in Irish schools, particularly as the structure that facilitates their involvement in decision-making and/or policy-making, it would seem imperative that all Boards of Management facilitate the funding of the NPC training. Parents in neither School A nor School B had yet engaged in the training. Funding was given as a reason in School A and the fact that it was not functioning in School B. It would appear that any school that was committed to creating a strong, active and effective Parents Association would ensure that the parents had access to the NPC training and to the element of support provided from the NPC to affiliated schools.

The ethos of ET schools is evident in that some of the challenges around decision making evident in this interview were around conflict between the BOM and the PA. This is a completely different level of challenge than what is occurring in School A and School B currently where there is no active decision making by the parents.

***“Em the Educate Together schools eh because they’d always kind of had parental involvement at the heart of it they had have joined the NPC but the NPC I think have never been quite sure what to do with the Educate Together schools because the problems that our parents had were different. They were around the Board not doing what the Parents Association wanted them to do and for some NPC schools I think they looked at them, looked at us and thought well what are you talking about. You’ve huge stuff going on.”***

In discussing Esptein’s advocacy for a clear and prioritised plan around parental involvement the Interviewee asserts

***“I think she’s right in the longer term in what she says about if you don’t strategically plan things don’t happen but I think because our schools are still quite small and they’re, they’re quite inward looking I think you can still have good parental involvement in a haphazard way if it is a core belief of the Principal and the Board. If people believe in that kind of thing I think it can happen. Because I think it happens in all sorts of small ways. It’s, if parents believe, if parents are given to believe that their views are genuinely respected then they will offer them and they will come into the schools more.”***

### **Interviewee 3**

There is a resounding association around parental involvement at the level of fundraising within Ireland from this Interviewee’s perspective

***“It sounds cynical but you know I started in this job four years ago and I’ve never worked in the education sector before and just without a shadow of a doubt that’s the parents’ role in schools. You get exceptions to it and you get schools doing really, really good em practices involving parents but without a shadow of a doubt the main role of schools, parents in schools is fundraising.”***

The role of the Education Act in identifying that parents and schools are to work together and the difference in how legislation works differently at national and local level in relation to recognised education partners, decision making and policy making emerged strongly in this interview.

***“In terms of Parents and Principals working together in schools you’ve got an Education Act that sits up there and says that they should but in a school that means nothing, do you know?. . . So,***

*the, the legislation in terms of parental involvement is probably one of the places where it works best is at the national level. We're involved in all of those discussions. Em, it's, it's probably at school level where the legislation has the least amount of impact. But that's bound to happen because basically legislation is only going to be useful at school level if a particular parent decides to take the school to court about not being involved in policy development. I don't know how long we're going to have to wait for somebody to do that . . . If a Parents Association is told, 'No we don't want your involvement in policies' it'd be it'd be very unusual to say 'Well we're going to take a court case against you do you know? So, generally they'll speak to us, they'll speak to somebody else, do you know and they'll come with the IPPN NPC document or whatever and then eventually give up. But em it'd be unusual that they'd take a court case. And legislation isn't useful if you're not going to take a court case in that respect, do you know?"*

The legislation provides for a partnership process. However how the legislation is enacted firstly by the DES in terms of ensuring there is appropriate time and scope for it to become priority in the school day and secondly by schools in terms of how they work with Parents Associations, the role they attribute to them and the profile of parents these structures require in terms of capacity and ability to engage appears to be inadequate, both in terms of providing scope to be involved in decision making and in ensuring they have the capacity to be inclusive.

Interviewee 3 identified a lack of any formal linkage with the Home School Community Liaison Scheme.

*"We would meet with Home School Liaison very rarely, not nearly as often as you think that we would and should. Em, I think in the start of Home School Liaison we would have had, and this is pre-*

***me now, but we would have had a lot closer em relationships but I think it's purely on the fact that systems spread. I mean we come across them but we don't have a network link that we regularly meet and discuss things but it is something that we should do . . . so like if you said to me I'd get another person then home school liaison would be one of the things I was fighting for that person to do . . . I mean they have projects that I'd be aware of that are really important that we should be promoting and being involved in but we don't have the staff."***

This is concerning given that it is part of the HSCL role to engage those parents who may not be involved with the school, where there are some social or family difficulties or where there may be some challenges in relation to the child's behaviour or learning. In addition a large number of the DEIS schools Parents Associations are not affiliated to the NPC, so they do not have access to the range of training and supports provided for members. Given the allocation of HSCL to DEIS schools it would seem imperative that there be some formal linkage or connection in order that HSCL practice can be influenced by the NPC and that policy making that the NPC is involved with can be well informed from the HSCL practice.

The profile of parents that get involved in Parents Associations is also raised in this interview

***"The amount of schools I've been into generally Parents Associations are middle-class constructs, which is why they're part of what we do but they can't be everything that we do and part of what we do is to try and make Parents Association not middle class constructs, which is why we do some stuff around the Parents Association training about being representative of the school body and all of those kind of things. But general speaking when I go out***

***to a Parents Association it's a group of parents who are already deeply involved in their children's education. They've got the message, they know what it is and they're happy to fundraise and do cake sales and all the rest of it. And I'm not saying that flippantly that is where they're at, you know?"***

The role described here again appears very much limited to fundraising even with functioning and active Parents Associations. Also as a structure it does appear to be one that attracts and engages with a particular profile of parent and therefore it could be argued it is not inclusive in its configuration. This has implications in terms of the decision-making occurring both in terms of what the PA prioritises and how it engages with the school. Given the fact that 'committee sitting' is directly attached to parental involvement in decision making in schools, it limits decision making to those parents who are comfortable doing this. The NPC are aware of this and seek to support schools to think somewhat differently about this

***"I think there was a sense we need strong committees, we need to have elected people, it needs to be democratic, they need to have rules and all of these things but in effect if we stick to that too rigidly we lose a whole load of people. They don't want to be part of committees. You don't have to be in a disadvantaged area to feel that . . . I think some of that is because of fundraising because they don't want to fundraise and that's all they see Parents Associations doing. But there is this thing as committees do lend themselves to certain types of people and completely put other people off."***

The NPC are aware of this and seek to support schools to think somewhat differently. The interviewee describes the approach the NPC advocates in relation to PAs



***“Parents’ Associations need to be relevant to their school. So there is no one size fits all. Each school has different needs. Em there is certain things that all of them should be doing like being consulted on policies, being consulted on the school plan, all of those kind of things but they also need to be relevant to their school. So if it’s in an area where you know just a place to sit and mix is a problem because the community doesn’t have that and the school can offer that and parents of children in that school can come and talk about their kids, talk about struggle, talk about, then that’s important to that school’s Parents Association in terms of providing that. It might not be important to the school down the road, the needs change. They have to fit the needs of the, the school.”***

In discussing Parental Associations in DEIS schools particular the interviewee confirms the challenges felt by schools around establishing PAs and how the NPC would advise and/or support them if they were to contact them

***“I mean we do get some calls, we don’t get enough call because they should be ringing us all the time saying they have difficulty but we have had some calls. More importantly when I’ve been out at meetings Principals from DEIS schools have said to me ‘Oh well, the Parents Association doesn’t really apply to our school’. And in fairness sometimes that’s because they’ve tried and it doesn’t work so because they can’t get parents to commit to a structure as such, do you know? So I hear it more anecdotally than Principals actually ringing saying I’m struggling, what can I do? But if we do get involved we’d be saying ‘Look lay off the things like officer level, like treasurers and chair people. If you’ve got a group of parents who are happy to meet on a regular or irregular basis and be involved in the school life, that’s your Parents Association. But***

***we would say that to other Parents Associations as well. You know there's a heavy kind of emphasis and we're as much to blame for this. And you have to look back into the history of parental involvement and Parents Associations being, I suppose the structure in a school to that as to why that developed. And I suppose when we got the legislation to say Parents Association could set up and everything there was a there was a real fear that if they didn't set up in a strong, robust way they'd be gone."***

The role of the Parents Association is emphasised throughout these interviews in facilitating and supporting parental involvement in decision making. The supportive role offered by the NPC in encouraging schools to work with their parents in terms of relevance of the construct of the PA and how best to work with the profile of parents in each school would be really helpful to both School A and School B. The conflict that can emerge between PA's and BOM's identified by Interviewee 2 appears unlikely to happen in either school for quite some time, given the difficulties in establishing a PA in School B and given the emerging role of the Principal in relation to the PA and the issue of power distance in School A.

### **Leadership**

It emerged strongly again in these three interviews that the leadership around parental involvement relies heavily on the Principal's role and their view of it.

***"The Principal is key in the leadership of the school and if the Principal doesn't believe that parents should be involved parents won't be involved in the school, they're that important because the Principal recommends to the Board so if they're not recommending to the Board that this needs to be done, well . . . but more than that it has to be a school approach so if you haven't got leadership***

***at the top then it's, it's not going to happen and if the Principal doesn't understand the absolute importance of parental involvement it ain't going to happen either."***

### **Interviewee 3**

A slight added element to this was evident in the ET model when the importance of the role of the Board, particularly the Chairperson was emphasised in the leading of parental involvement

***"It's the Principal and the Board generally speaking. If the Principal and the Board are working together its fantastic you can just get really good stuff . . . so yeah the Principal would be one definite thing. But also a strong Board and in particular a strong Chairperson, because if the Principal is not dealing with parental involvement, you can have a good Chairperson and a good Board who will ease them into that role. But it is difficult. If you have I mean you know I would have one or two Principals that I think would be not as good at parental involvement as they could be and it's very difficult, very difficult to shift them out of that, em because it's out of their comfort zone and they just won't do it."***

### **Interviewee 2**

The importance of the role of the BOM in ET schools in relation to leading parental involvement and ensuring that it is prioritised in the work of the school is a key finding of this research. The capacity and commitment of BOM's in other schools to do this may require some further specific direction and/or support from the DES and some thought in terms of the composition of school BOMs.

Interviewee 1 also emphasises the role of the Principal in leading parental involvement

***“I’d say it definitely has to be something that the school leader has to have in their quiver. Em like that’s not to say that I’m getting it right or whatever I just do feel that, em, they, eh you have to make it, you have to facilitate parental involvement in all those areas and if you’re not proactively facilitating it, it won’t happen you know? So I do think it has to be a person whose responsibility to initiate it and to facilitate is the school leader. The Principal.”***

There is a clear contrast in the interview with Interviewee 1 compared to the two Principals in the school sites in relation to the leadership approach and particularly an attempt to balance process and task/outcome focused pieces of work. As previously identified, in referencing a proposal from the Parents’ Association to revise the Anti-Bullying policy he identified the process around this as a strength ***“people do feel that they had, they’ve had a say in it.”*** This involved a discussion that went back and forth between the PA and the teaching staff until the policy reflected the elements the parents requested. Parental involvement is a key indicator for Educate Together schools and this does appear to impact on the emphasis placed on it by the leadership as Interviewee 1 identifies both in terms of a school analysis of itself and peer discussions with other ET Principals

***“Yeah I do feel that when we ask ourselves at the end of the year are we being genuinely an Educate Together school we will use the extent to which parents are involved in our school as a barometer and I think other school’s mightn’t. That mightn’t be a success criteria for other schools but I think we would see it as a success criteria.”***

***“Like ET Principals like when we get together we like we do ask each other things like how do you get parents more involved or how do you like we all know the good ideas but how do you make them manifest? How do you tweak out the problems?”***

Interviewee 1 in describing his own style of leadership identifies it as distributive, inclusive and emotional. He emphasises the importance of facilitating voice and agency and challenges the notion of a democratic approach to leadership. He identifies an example around how if he had engaged in a democratic style of leadership that the majority of parents would have insisted on a uniform which is not supported within the ET ethos. He demonstrates a real commitment to and a belief in the importance of ‘praxis’ in leading parental involvement in his school

***“You initiate actions. You let actions happen. You, eh, you take their unpredictability on the chin. Em you allow every action regardless of whether it’s been successful or unsuccessful to be big moments of dialogue and conversation. Eh, you privately and collaboratively reflect on them, em, and you then say to yourself, right well if I was doing that again I’d do again but next time I’d tweak x aspect of it or y aspect of it and then you do it again.”***

As part of the discussion around the importance of clarity of intent and strategic planning as advocated by Epstein Interviewee 2 raises the issue of capacity at school Board of Management level in the current way that this is structured.

***“I think if the school is in its permanent building, if it has reached its full level of staff, it’s settled I think that’s a possibility but the problem is that you have eight voluntary people. They may or may***

*not have experience of strategic planning em and they may not even understand what you mean by strategic planning. Em I think that the strategic planning is important but I actually think that intent is as important. I think if you believe in parental involvement and it comes through in what you plan as a Board then that's more important than strategic planning which is not a comfort zone for a Board generally . . . but I think if the Principal and the Board believe in it, it will happen without necessarily a strategic plan because it'll run through everything they believe in. They will be asking ourselves without even thinking about it, well how will we get the parents involved in that. It'll just come up. Em but I think that I think school governance is still very haphazard . . . And particularly in a DEIS school it may not have anything like that. I mean the most professional or the most educated person there may be the Principal . . . And even Principals, like Principals are teachers who are promoted to the job of Principal. They may or may not be strategically planning type of people."*

This all has implications in terms of valuing and prioritising elements of school beyond curricular and learning elements, power distance, training and the capacity of Boards to effectively challenge the Principal if they observe a lack of commitment to or facilitation of parental involvement.

The importance of the affective domain of leadership is identified by Interviewee 2. She highlights the importance of body language, the capacity to give elements of emotional support and the importance of parents feeling genuine respect.

*"It's, if parents believe, if parents are given to believe that their views are genuinely respected then they will offer them and they will come into the schools more. If, and that's to do with body language and with inner intent. So if a Principal is warm and*

***welcoming and is the kind of person that parents feel they can go to then they will come in.”***

Interviewee 2 also highlights that ‘the leading’ in terms of parental involvement is something that can change and develop over time. Schools respond differently depending on their age, the parents involved and the leadership involved. Given this changing dynamic clarity of intent regarding parental involvement by the school emerges as important. As Interviewee 2 states parental involvement is not simply ***‘doing things my way’*** as some parents might like.

The attitude and belief system of the Principal in relation to parental involvement is emphasised strongly by Interviewee 2. In answering a question on who sets the agenda for parental involvement a range of options were given including Educate Together, the school, HSCL, parents, the Principal, PA and BOM. She responds

***“I think all of the above in varying degrees but I still would put the Principal up the top there. I think if you’ve a Principal who doesn’t want parental involvement you’ll find it hard. I think if you’ve a Principal who really is passionate about parental involvement it, it won’t always work but they’ll keep trying. You know, they, they will, they’ll try other ways of doing it. If they’re passionate about it it’ll mean, it, they will try different things. Some of them will work better than others. And they, they’ll be concerned about it. They’ll be concerned about turnout at meetings.”***

There is a connection made to what teachers are trained to do by Interviewee 3. She identifies that teachers are not generally trained to start involving ‘non-professionals’ in their work. This undoubtedly has

implications for parental involvement and what the leadership may need to do to ensure it is possible in their school.

Interviewee 3 identifies the role of the DES in relation to leadership on parental involvement. ***“So the Department work parental involvement into all the things that they produce . . . in fairness to the Department they work it in wherever they can.”*** She observes that it is more at the level of the school that change is required. She identifies that the legislation exists to provide for parental involvement and that the DES provide for it at policy level.

***“It’s really embedded in terms of the policy stuff but I don’t necessarily see it coming down. And I mean we’ve no desire to particularly change the legislation because the legislation is there but the problem is the implementation of it. And I mean the implementation of policy as well. And I mean you have clear direct policy going to schools saying that parents should be consulted in development of school policies and they should be informed about them. I spoke to a parent last night who asked for the anti-bullying policy of the school and was told, no, that it’s nothing to do with them. So they’re the extremes that you’re dealing with, do you know? So it’s actually what’s happening on the ground is what needs to change not, not necessarily policy.”***

In discussing a proposal around a long-term vision for parent led parental involvement and what would need to occur to achieve that Interviewee 3 identifies:

***“I think if Principals don’t take this bull by the horns it’s not going to happen so you can have all the legislation, you can have anything you want but if Principals don’t take a leadership role in this it ain’t going to happen . . . that’s why I was quite taken with***



***eh title of this I thought it's the way it needs to be looked at. Because I agree parents should be leading it and we're doing our bit to try and get parents to lead it despite Principals. But it, it has to come from a leadership position in the school"***

The NPC have recently adapted their training for PAs to facilitate more parent led work and also to reflect some of Epstein's work. In discussing what type of leadership might support this parent-led parental involvement Interviewee 3 explains her view

***"Well I think the type is a life-long learner. And I know that doesn't come into your leadership types there the democratic, the autocratic etc. all those but I think it is a life-long learner because I think that up until and including now, because they still don't do it, there's no information given to teachers and principals about the benefits of it so unless you are open to new ideas and new beliefs and things that are really going to rock everything that you know, which really this is. I mean up until research 10 or 12 years ago which in research terms is very recent we were all led to believe that if children came from low socio economic backgrounds where parents had poor education that really this was a cycle that was unbreakable. I think the new research is much more optimistic. But if you're not of the type that says, 'well all those things that I was told I actually now need to re-examine', then you're never going to get this. So I think you have to be that life-long learner type of, of leader."***

### **Sources of Inequality**

It emerges from these three interviews that it is under the domains of 'representation' and the 'affective' that the main potential sources of inequality in relation to parental involvement exist. This has primarily to do with the involvement in decision making, exercise of power, power

distance, belief system and approach of the Principal in leading the parental involvement and the importance of the capacity for emotional leadership, management and support. There is also some potential under the 'distribution' domain due to the fact that often the PA's in DEIS schools are not functioning or not supported and that its role is limited in the majority of other schools to fundraising activities.

In a quote used earlier in this Chapter Interviewee 1 identifies some of the challenges on the ground of working with a diverse school population. This includes where some cultural practices may be at a divergence with the Irish law in terms of gender equality and sexual identity. He also identifies difficulties for some of the women and children in relation to domestic violence and issues of child protection.

***“Em I I feel that there’s dysfunction from a variety of sources going on in the lives of a lot of our families that em makes for traumatised mothers and traumatised children and you know em that can be on occasions overwhelming for them . . . so eh you know I’d be loathe to say that, you know school alone can function to overcome what some of our mothers in particular and children have to experience . . . we have parents who experience violence on a daily, children who experience violence on a daily basis . . . and like the children are doing well in our set up here and, in school and they would seem to like be flourishing and thriving but you know em you don’t know what will happen.”***

This also relates to how the population of the school developed. Interviewee 1 identifies that very few of the parents would have chosen an Educate Together school due to its ethos or principles but that it was the only school place available to them. This is similar to School B development and seems to be a common element of Educate Together

schools in recent years and relates to how the DES has responded to the need for new schools in growing areas and school patronage.

In dealing with and responding to this Interviewee 1 acknowledges the importance of not employing a 'one size fits all' approach

***“We know that we need to go about things from a certain perspective with certain groups, with certain individuals. We know, we know that there is massive diversity in how the school is understood em culturally within our groups not just the parents and teachers but like parent to parent. So you can’t have equality without treating people uniquely.”***

Effective strategies around outreach and inclusion were a key theme emerging from the Migrant Parent project carried out by the NPC. As mentioned previously once the initial barrier of coming into the school was overcome the NPC found similar difficulties for parents who wanted to be involved in the school. These were not culture specific. Interviewee 3 identifies

***“We found no difference. And also we found that once parents, you see, we’re in a position where we’re a parent group asking parents to come in and once parents were coming in there was no reluctance to come in. There was no sense of we don’t want to be here and you know we don’t feel that we have a right to be here . . . the second bit of that project then was re-imagining our Parent Association training to try and support PA s to be more inclusive because ultimately we were finishing this project so we needed to leave it with something . . . the structures you need to have in place to make sure you’re including people. And that’s not just saying ‘well we’ve really written out to these parents and asked***

***them to be part of it' do you know? How do they suddenly have a trust in an establishment that they know nothing about?"***

In summing up this migrant project and particularly relevant for this research Interviewee 3 states

***"So it's not all about the fact that you've reached out, it's whether you've reached out in the way that will allow them to come in and trust you. So, we did a lot of work with that kind of concept with the PA training aswell."***

Interviewee 3 explains her view with regard to advocating for the focus of equality to be on the children rather than specifically on the parent, albeit that the parent might be the recipient of some of the support

***"You see people see the equality coming from the parental point of view right so well all these parents are equal so why are you going to give more to those four than all of these right? But the equality issue is about the children and the children aren't all equal. There's some children that are struggling from a much further place behind than the other kids and you have to bring them up to the level of the other kids in the classroom. They all have to be starting from the same point and if that means investing more in their parents to get them to that equal position then that's what you do."***

Interviewee 2 gives examples of how engaging with their child's school can act as a transformative agent for some individuals. This has been her experience in relation to what she observed through her own involvement in her child's school and also through her work experience with Educate Together over the years

***“The amount of women I have seen from what would traditionally have been described as working class backgrounds where they didn’t really go further than the Leaving Cert if even that far, eh and they’ve gone onto Boards of Management and they’ve done things they never believed they would do. They’ve met Ministers, they’ve fought with Ministers. They have, you know, gone up against various organisations and committees because you’d do that for your children. You won’t do it for yourself but you’ll do it for your child . . . I have seen that time and time again . . . And maybe that’s my age old feminism coming through, I think of women more than men. I’m sure it’s true of men too. But I see it of women you know that they wanted they were willing to go back to school to be able to read with their children. They wouldn’t do it for themselves.”***

A traditional approach in schools in terms of creating change is to identify key parents to work with and develop with the aim of them linking back with the wider Community of parents. This was evident in both schools in this research. In discussing the development of parents identified as ‘role models’ by the school and Freire’s caution around these individuals then becoming ‘outside’ the Community so that they in effect ‘lose’ the leadership qualities or influence they initially had, Interviewee 3 attributes this to the ‘Educating Rita’ phenomena. ***“You educate yourself out of your community and into another”***. The importance of changing systems instead was emphasised in this part of the interview.

***“We just say ‘you want to succeed?’ Right. So we need a percentage of you to succeed in our system so the way to do this is to take them out’. And you’re not changing the system at all. And it’s like, you know, Aboriginal children being taken from their parents and being given to white Australians exactly the same thing. You’re saying well look we we want to move you towards our***

***belief of what is a good thing e.g. white middle class universities. So, let's take you out of where you are, transform you and plonk you in here and that a good thing. And all you've done is depleted the source of community based work there and fast tracked them into middle class systems."***

## **Conclusions**

The importance of Principals prioritising, engaging with and leading parental involvement emerges strongly in these interviews. It is clearly identified that if parental involvement is not a priority at Principal level, it is unlikely to develop. The BOM is identified as a key element in terms of governance and in challenging a Principal who may not be supporting and/or promoting parental involvement in his/her school. The importance of a clear and positive intention with regard to parental involvement and the ability to demonstrate empathy and have a level of emotional awareness are also key findings in relation to this research.

Some of the challenges in leading a multi-cultural school environment emerge. These are connected to a range of social and gender related issues and concerns e.g. domestic violence, child protection, religious views and sexuality. There appears to be a focus nationally on parental involvement in fundraising and this in fact could be the situation at a European level also. A difference does emerge in terms of the nature of challenges schools face with regard to parental involvement. ET schools contact their Head Office around emerging differences of opinion on how parental involvement is occurring in individual schools e.g. the lack of priority placed on it by a Principal and/or the over-reaching expectations put on the school from the parents. This may at times involve some disputes between the BOM and the Principal. This level of discussion does not appear to be occurring in other schools where queries to the NPC are more focused on parents accessing policy documents from their

schools, information on joining the PA, supporting schools with PA development etc.

The importance of support and CPD for Principals is identified as is the capacity and time and/or space for self-reflection. Training, support and an apparent need to give a rationale to teachers for promoting parental involvement is emphasised. The importance of the child being at the centre of these discussions and clearly identifying the benefits for the child is highlighted in this regard.

There are low levels of PAs in DEIS schools and very low levels of affiliation to the NPC in cases where there are PAs. The NPC recognise how the structures around parental involvement remain 'middle class constructs' particularly with the focus on the PA. The formal structure was historically created in an attempt to ensure that the 'parental voice' was taken seriously and that it was embedded in formal school structures. The NPC would be of the view that 'parental involvement' remains a challenge for all parents and not just those in DEIS schools, albeit that the challenges may be different.

In Chapter 6 there is further discussion of the findings from the research. It also identifies a number of recommendations and proposes a model that could support the development of meaningful and inclusive parental involvement in schools.

## **Chapter 6 Key Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

This research explored the leading of parental involvement in primary schools in areas experiencing educational inequality. The aims of this research were

- To explore the commitment to and actual levels of engagement of parents as partners within each of the schools
- To determine what constitutes parental involvement in the two schools
- To explore and examine the leadership approaches operating within the two schools in relation to parental involvement
- To establish the relevance and use of best practice in engaging the parents and informing work with the parents in the schools

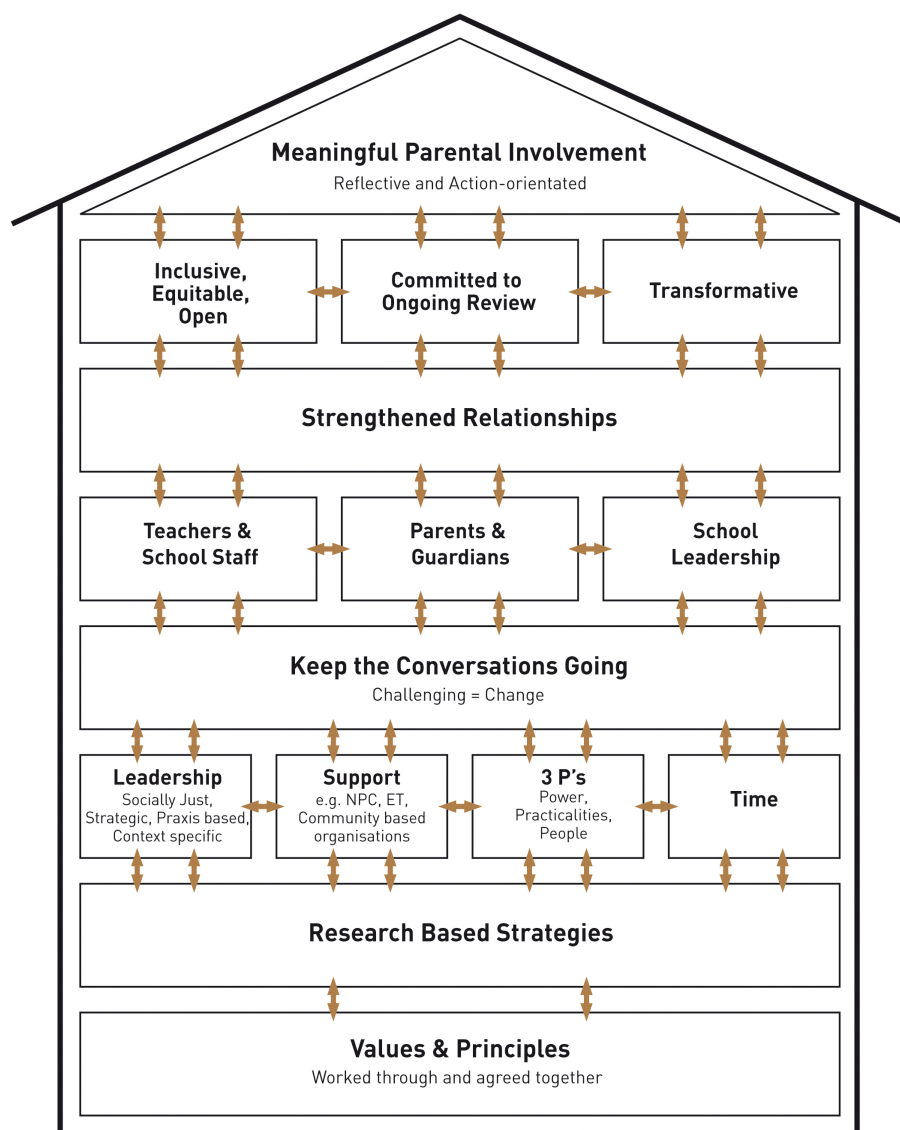
The chapter begins with a proposed ‘scaffolding’ to address the emerging need to develop ‘process, praxis and partnership’ in relation to parental involvement in the Irish school context. In Chapter 1 this research as a critical theory study committed to identifying what is wrong with the current social reality, identify the actors that can change it and provide clear norms for a critical exploration and the identification of achievable practical goals for social transformation (Bohman, 2012). The findings from this research discussed through the proposed scaffolding seek to address that.

This chapter discusses key findings in relation to the substantive, theoretical and methodological issues. This involves linking the key findings and recommendations to the research aims, the literature



reviewed and the theoretical ideas presented in Chapter 3. This also includes an evaluation of the research design in the light of the findings and the use of the theoretical framework and methods selected. A small number of recommendations for audiences at local and national level are also introduced.

The key findings and recommendations are set in the context of the research case study approach and so are not intended to be 'generalisable' in a universal sense. However, there are tentative recommendations emerging from this research process that may be applicable across schools and at national level. The overarching interviews at national level have contributed greatly to this.



**Fig**

**5: Proposed scaffolding to support inclusive parental involvement in schools**  
**“Building inclusive parental involvement on solid foundations, brick by brick,**  
**conversation by conversation”**

This scaffolding has been developed as an invitation to school communities to address some of the main findings of this case study research. As is presented each of the foundation stones and thematic bricks feed in and out of each other and so are inter-connecting by nature. The findings that are presented below can be located in either the foundation stones and/or several of the thematic blocks. The reader and/or users of the scaffolding may indeed contribute to this through their own experiences and/or process of using the scaffolding. The researcher has identified some of the possible locations below and draws on some of the literature and theoretical ideas presented in earlier chapters.

### **The nature of parental involvement**

- The commitment to parental involvement in schools emerges mainly from the Irish legislative framework and appears to be more around the external indicators set by the DES in terms of Whole School Evaluation and DEIS plans e.g. the existence of a Parents' Association. However there appears to be a difference in schools under Educate Together patronage. Parental involvement is one of its core principles and there are internal mechanisms for evaluating and ensuring that parental involvement is and remains a school's priority. This brings its own challenges in terms of expectations of some of the parents in the ET schools that were established over the first thirty years of its history and those established since the mid-2000s. This difference relates to the multicultural make-up of the more recently established schools and how these cultures engage with education. The NPC pilot project on Migrant Parents provides some useful insights for both schools and parents on 'cultural difference' in this regard.

- Parental involvement continues to be mainly comprised of fundraising activities or 'helping out' roles in schools. The NPC work hard with its affiliated PAs to promote the approach that there is a separate fundraising committee comprising of school staff and parents in an effort to ensure the PA do not merely carry out a fundraising role. ET also support and challenge principals and parents to ensure the parental involvement role extends beyond fundraising and 'helping out'.
- Decision making and policy making are the areas that parents are involved with least, despite the legislative framework identifying their role in these areas. Involvement in decision making and policy making, if occurring, appears to be mainly consultative. There are issues of 'power', 'power distance', 'capacity', 'confidence', 'clarity of role and function' and 'time and priority' at play here. However there are also issues relating to professional training of teachers and principals, composition of Boards of Management and how schools are requested by the DES to report on and be accountable around parental involvement. Parents are identified as recognised partners in education and yet there is no training for teachers on how to involve the 'non-professional' in their work, no discussion or debate on the value of doing that from a 'child-centred' approach with a 'harder to reach' parent. There is also a gap in terms of discussion at management and leadership level around the values and philosophy that supports inclusive parental involvement through an approach that is socially just, effective and inclusive. Studies (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2003b; Hanafin and Lynch 2002; Coleman 1996; Epstein 1985, 1990, 1992, 1995, 2001, 2002) have highlighted the limited nature of parental involvement in schools identifying that parents view their involvement at the practical rather than at policy making level. This study reiterates that finding despite the legislative and

policy frameworks that provide for their involvement at school policy making level.

- The Education partners need to identify that, different interpretations of the word 'primary Educator' in the constitution, exist among them. The scope of parental role and involvement in education is currently emanating from this difference in interpretation. If schools acknowledged that 'primary' means 'most important' rather than 'first' the emphasis of their work with parents would most likely change.
- The impact of multi-cultural issues which emerged particularly in School B and with Interviewee 1 requires further exploration and research. Cultural issues also emerged in School A but appeared to be related to values, attitude and class. This impacted greatly on involvement and will require further study. The NPC's Migrant project contains a lot of learning for both schools in this regard in that it identifies that the apparent barriers e.g. language, values, perceptions of professional roles may well be the presenting barrier but ultimately it has more to do with 'expert power', 'capacity to power share' and 'engagement strategies that hook parents'.
- An element of the multi-cultural challenge relates to concerns regarding child welfare & protection on levels of violence and disciplinary measures used in some families. There is an opportunity at national level with the Children's First 2011 process to support schools on this. This process includes inter-departmental level work under the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. There is undoubtedly a balance to be observed regarding the limits of influence of a school or the extent to which a principal can exert her power in her role as principal on family life. However under the impending Children's First Bill high levels of responsibility are being placed on all schools and services both working directly and indirectly with

children. The importance of partnerships with Community organisations and services are paramount in this regard.

- A reiteration of and emphasis on a 'child-centered' approach to parental involvement could dissipate some of the challenges attached to creating a meaningful parental involvement. Managing parents' expectations has at times been a challenge for Educate Together as some parents, identifying with the ethos on parental involvement, wish to spend prolonged time in the classroom, confer with the teacher on curriculum matters and/or visit their child continuously in school. Also the NPC identified that in training teachers to facilitate parental involvement, a focus on it being in the best interest for the child, may be an effective extrinsic motivator for teaching staff

Epstein's research lends much to a discussion on these findings when she identifies that parental involvement increases when the school actively and with clear intention sets it as a goal and develops it. Her 'Spheres of Influence model' also demonstrates the importance of ensuring the three spheres underpinning the child's educational experience are acknowledged, conscious of each other and attempting to work together. Taking cognisance of Bourdieu's arguments regarding cultural capital, the importance of the 'cultural capital' of the parents and the surrounding Community being evident, 'recognised' and 'represented' is of paramount importance in the **'Values and Principles'** foundation stone in the scaffolding that are to be worked through and agreed together. Freire's ideas of co-intentional dialogue and the Lynch and Lodge framework in terms of ensuring 'recognition' and 'representation' moves beyond cultural groupings with regard to ethnic background and gender, to those that are coming from different cultural capital exchanging a different cultural currency than the dominating forces within the education system are also highly significant for this first

foundation block. The thematic block on **‘Leadership’** addresses the lack of participation of parents in decision making and policy making roles. A leadership that is advocating for social justice through inclusive practice and that is addressing the context specific aspects to its role, in facilitating parental involvement, will explore the most appropriate model for its purpose. A review of distributive leadership may support schools in achieving this. This also links to foundation stones one and two and the thematic blocks **‘3Ps’**, **‘Keeping the Conversations Going’** and **‘Strengthened Relationships’**.

### **Evidencing, reviewing and measuring parental involvement**

- There is no formal recording of parental involvement in Ireland. From a national perspective this would be ‘depressing’ according to the NPC. However it is connected to another key finding of this research i.e. to review what it is we are measuring in relation to parental involvement.
- Based on this case study, there is a gap between research and policy and how parental involvement is approached and occurs on the ground. This was one of the emerging questions for this research from the Literature Review.
- A commitment to more regular, strategic and connected work practices between the Home School Liaison Scheme and the National Parents Council is required at a national level. This is particularly important given the role of the HSCL in DEIS Band 1 schools and the low levels of Parents Associations that exist in these schools and if existing, are not affiliated to the NPC so they do not benefit from their training and support. At a local level there is a need for a more effective, structured and planned interface between the work of the HSCL, the wider school staff and the school leadership including the Boards of Management.

- The focus of ‘measurement’ and ‘evaluation’ in relation to parental involvement in Irish schools requires further discussion and exploration. The existence of a Parents Association does not necessarily secure meaningful parental involvement and in fact if a school focuses on this as the key indicator it could prevent inclusive practice around parental involvement in an attempt to secure the ‘appropriate’ profile of parents to engage in a PA. The NPC also raise the distinction between measuring and identifying parental involvement in their child’s learning and measuring literacy levels of parents. The latter is not a predictor of effective parental involvement but in their experience appears to garner a lot of the focus in data collected at school level and DES level. School staff and parents could be supported to ‘self-reflect’ and ‘self-evaluate’ across a range of indicators in relation to meaningful parental involvement. The ET self-evaluation process for schools could be helpful in developing this approach.
- Schools require support and time to reflect in relation to ‘strategies for engagement’ with parents. If a particular strategy yields the same profile of parents each time this needs to be addressed. In School A we see the example of this being the actual intention, however for real inclusive practice with parents this would require further reflection, thought, review and challenge. The NPC identify that a strategy of engagement should facilitate trust building and relationship building with parents. The actors within that strategy of engagement may need to change or include other Community based partners to be effective in this regard.
- The connection of parental involvement to the ‘education improvement agenda’ while somewhat understandable now requires further thinking and a re-framing of how that operates. It appears to have shaped practice with a narrow focus on outputs e.g. an



operating PA, parents involved in policy making (usually more consultative or could be minimal amount of parents). This finding links with the point above around the focus of 'measurement' and/or evaluation. In relation to parental involvement and promoting inclusive schools more generally, the inclusion of more process related indicators in the 'education improvement agenda' are required. These indicators must take cognisance of the interconnected political and power related debate.

The findings above are again addressed across the scaffolding presented. If a school commits to a 'socially just', process and outcome based indicators and an inclusive set of **values and principles**, how it measures its parental involvement and evidences it, will be fit for purpose. If the **leadership** is distributed the parental voice and community expertise will begin to appear in the dynamic of the school. This dynamic can potentially work through the **3 Ps** in terms of addressing power issues and the actors involved. Through the '**research based strategies**' it is proposed that thinking around the consequences of traditional management styles and the narrowly focused education improvement agenda and the measurement tools that emerge from them, will start to be interrogated, reflected upon and changed. '**Support**' from those external to the school community can bring a different perspective to this conversation. Findings from this research process in School A and School B using the Lynch and Lodge framework, demonstrates that if one examines sources of inequality, although legislation and policy guidelines may be followed, inequality can still occur. An example of this relates again to Bourdieu's cultural capital theory i.e. what is to be 'represented', what is to be 'recognised'? The cultural capital being transmitted in the education system remains that of the dominant forces of those who succeed in the system.

### **Leadership approach**

- The role of 'leadership' and the 'approach to leading' cannot be overstated in relation to parental involvement. Currently the role of the principal is emphasised. The various roles within the leadership e.g. the DES, the BOM, the Principal, the PA, the HSCL all require clarity of function and intention in relation to creating and maintaining meaningful and effective parental involvement. However, this should form part of a 'scoping out' exercise as part of a developmental dialogue, not a prescriptive piece about how it should be. Examples of best practice and guidelines are undoubtedly helpful but school sites need to be engaged in this level of dialogue if change is to be created. The potential role of BOM in all of this is a key finding. The BOM is the only structure currently that can have a 'challenging role' to the principal's view in terms of their commitment to and relationship with parental involvement. The composition and capacity of the BOM has a key impact on their ability to do this. It appears in this case study that the ethos of Educate Together does impact on the school leadership's approach, the priority level and the need for on-going discussions regarding parental involvement.

The case study metaphor presented in Chapter 3 acknowledges the national level influence in terms of leading parental involvement with regard to the role of the DES, policy and legislation. The element of accountability carried by the principal in relation to the DES requires consideration until such time as the hierarchical, traditional management style practices have evolved. Schools on an individual basis could commence distributive style leadership practices within that context and this would provide a framework for inclusion of all partners within parental involvement and the leading of it. Again the scaffolding

invites schools to explore this through the foundation stones and the individual thematic bricks. The opportunity for on-going dialogue including challenging conversations and identifying these as opportunities for change in practice and potentially the power-base. Freire's philosophy of advocating for all actors to honestly assess, reflect on and own their position in the current dynamic resonates here. It is only in acknowledging where the current power base is and where it needs to develop to that **transformative** action can occur. The concertive action identified as part of distributive leadership by Gronn could be relevant here, whereby the power lies in the mutual interaction and the relational activity rather than with one individual.

### **Structures for leadership**

- A bolstering and strengthening of the role for the BOM's in relation to parental involvement would be helpful. This may require an examination of composition, capacity levels, training, areas of responsibility and ensuring that Chairs have some management/strategic management experience/capacity. This links to the Lynch and Lodge sources of inequality framework in that it can appear that power is distributed, it can appear that representation is addressed, it can appear that cultural difference is recognised and yet depending on the capacity and strength of this element of the leadership it can still result in inequality or a lack of meaningful parental involvement.
- Parental Involvement needs to be built into the architecture of the school in order that it can be prioritised in busy school life. This is somewhat achieved in School A in how it is included in Job Descriptions of post holders and how every event must have a parental involvement element. However this requires development and further extension if it is to move beyond the practical and into the

policy level detail. Parental involvement should be an agenda item on staff meetings and Board meeting agendas and needs to move beyond its current task focus. There is a potential role for the DES in facilitating time for this and driving the requirement for this priority. There is also a role for the NPC and ET in supporting the types of discussions and processes that are required. This needs to all be framed within a respect and acknowledgement for the role of the professional Educator and ET's commitment to parental involvement within respect for the professional boundary of the teacher could be helpful here. This is all further developed in the model presented at the end of this Chapter.

- The functioning, perceived role and perceived value of the Parents' Association is paramount in the current construct of parental involvement in Ireland. This raises the question about all PAs being affiliated with NPC. Given the support and development that can occur through their work it appears that all PAs should be facilitated to affiliate. This raises the question of funding and resourcing for the NPC and its funders. It also raises the question about whether PAs should have to fundraise for their initial affiliation or if the school should provide funding to affiliate its PA?

The structures for leadership involvement emerge from a view that emphasises formal traditional methods. This by its very nature can be exclusive. Again the cultural capital theory is relevant here. The capacity to engage in this type of structure is not universal and creates exclusion by its very nature. Schools that may have a very effective Parents' Association and parental representation at Board of Management level may fair much less well in an integrated and cross cutting analysis based on Lynch and Lodge's sources of inequality framework. As has been identified in this research, traditionally DEIS

schools encounter difficulties when it comes to Parents Associations and so appear to be doubly disadvantaged i.e. the schools struggle to find a replacement structure for parents to communicate with the school and the parents do not then have access to the support of the NPC. These findings link to the two foundation stones and a number of the thematic bricks i.e. **‘Leadership’, ‘Support’, ‘Inclusive Equitable Open’, ‘Committed to Ongoing Review’.**

### **Supporting leadership**

- The importance of further research into the affective domain in schools emerges. The importance of the leadership’s capacity to emotionally manage themselves and their staff team in relation to parental involvement and to also have capacity for empathy with parents and at times to support the emotional management of the parents needs further study.
- The opportunity for Principals to engage in on-going leadership training and debate is clear. A Principal’s work experience and training usually leaves him/her well placed to lead teaching and learning in his/her school. Training and support for Principals on matters of strategic planning, change management, people management (including non-professional groupings) and their capacity and ability to reflect on their own power and its impact on the leadership all emerge as areas for further work in relation to parental involvement.
- How the Irish-context supports schools, Principals and the leadership regarding parental involvement also requires some further exploration and discussion. It would be helpful to ensure that there was space for professional reflection and dialogue in this regard. Parental involvement, particularly given the changes in Irish society over the last number of years, can be a complex matter and can require

emotional investment along with other cognitive capacity. The importance of self-care, self-awareness and a reflective space, which is more usual in health and social care professional environments in Ireland, is paramount and would contribute to the Educators' capacity to engage in inclusive practice.

The scaffolding invites schools and parents to engage in this type of dialogue and reflection by working through the foundations stones and thematic bricks. The **'values and principles'** foundation stone could set the tone for this, although it may take a revisiting following some of the other thematic blocks e.g. **'support', '3Ps'** before relationships are secure enough, the power base has shifted and the hierarchical nature of discussions has evolved. If schools commit to a socially just value base with an inclusive leadership approach they could use the Lynch and Lodge framework as part of their internal **'ongoing review'** of their practices around parental involvement. The researcher has developed the view that the affective domain would emerge as an area requiring much further work at a research and practice level and could potentially be a primary source of resolving issues pertaining to 'cultural capital', 'participation', 'empathy', 'relationship', 'uninvolvement' as practitioners and parents develop self-awareness, self-management and the capacity for praxis.

### **Equality, Social Inclusion and Social Justice**

- Directly or indirectly, most parents in this study, neither identify the existence of nor acknowledge any difficulty with, the power distance that exists. They expect things to be school-led. This links to Bush's comment regarding expert power as referenced in Chapter 2. The majority of them view the disengaged parents similarly to the school staff and place full responsibility with the 'uninvolved parents' and

believe there is not much the school can do. This is in stark contrast to Epstein's et al. extensive research on this matter (2002). Freire's argument for developing a new social consciousness amongst those who are oppressed with those that are doing the oppressing resonates here. His emphasis on the weaknesses inherent in approaches that involve extracting 'parts from the whole', working with them and then hoping they can influence 'other parts' again is also relevant. Given the disconnect that is apparent between parents that are involved with those that are not, this approach is, as Freire posits, unlikely to create any change.

- It could be '**transformative**' if a dialogue could be initiated amongst school partners, including parents (both those currently involved and those uninvolved), in order that a level of awareness can emerge amongst them about how things are currently. Given the power distance and the parents apparent acceptance of 'expert power', this process could benefit from initial '**support**' from some external organisations to the school e.g. Community based organisations, Educate Together, NPC. However, in order for there to be on-going and lasting change, the dialogue, reflection, action—and ultimately praxis—must emerge from the dialogical process among the partners. Based on this research process it is likely that '**time**' may be identified as a real barrier to what is required.
- As is evident in the analysis of data through the Lynch and Lodge sources of inequality framework, it can appear that power is distributed, it can appear that representation is addressed, it can appear that cultural difference is recognised and yet depending on other elements flagged in the framework e.g. the values and approach of the Principal, the capacity and strength of other elements of the leadership e.g. BOM and the confidence levels and experience of the

parental body,-it can still result in inequalities in terms of the partnership or a lack of meaningful parental involvement.

- One of the key messages from working within Community Development Principles is that we should not view 'Community' as a fixed entity. This means that we should engage with 'the Community' in an on-going and open manner which facilitates the fluidity required for an inclusive approach. This connects with the leadership literature discussed earlier which emphasises the importance of developing more of a 'toolkit' with a variety of approaches, methodologies and a capacity for flexibility, as opposed to searching for a 'prescription for effectiveness'. In terms of committing to a leadership approach with an underlying value base of social justice, inclusion and equity, this research identifies distributive leadership as promising in the framework it provides both for 'distributing power and decision making' and 'capacity-building' across the organisation. This capacity-building needs to occur at the level of professional educator, principal, parents and Boards of Management.
- Ryan's study on the political acumen possessed by Principals who identified themselves as pursuing inclusion, social justice and equity goals is interesting in relation to the Principals in School A and School B. While the Principal in School A appears to possess high levels of political acumen in relation to leading and managing her school drawing on networks and community linkages and operating at national level to draw resources, she operates from a value base that may prohibit her using this acumen in a way that facilitates disenfranchised groups to participate. As is evidenced this Principal actively promotes a particular profile of parent for involvement. The Principal in School B appears to operate with lower levels of political acumen but in operating from a relationship based model is more inclusive in her approach generally. The lack of strategic planning



and embedding of this in school structures leaves the approach and therefore the ‘inclusiveness’ somewhat vulnerable if there was a change of personnel. Neither Principal was actively pursuing ‘equity goals’ although Principal A identified that it was something she would bear in mind for the next year’s planning. The Principal in the overarching interviews operates with high levels of political acumen and clearly links treating different groups uniquely with facilitating equity and ultimately equality. The political element of their roles could form part of the leadership training and promotion of self-reflection for Principals.

- Whilst the legal and policy frameworks acknowledge the partnership role and position of parents in this education partnership, the practice on the ground falls well short of implementing this. A platform is provided where the parental role is emphasised, however there is little in the supporting or the monitoring of the practice that encourages or promotes schools to effectively ‘power-share’.
- Parental involvement is a challenge for schools in most areas in Ireland. Schools and parents in DEIS Band 1 areas face some additional complexities and challenges e.g. in relation to: parental experience of school, confidence levels, communication styles, experience and expertise regarding formal structures, Principals’ perceptions of PAs in DEIS areas, power distance and the whole area of emotional support/the affective domain for parents, school staff and Principals. The NPC identify clearly the importance of a ‘relevant parental involvement’ and the responsibility of schools to ensure their ‘strategy of engagement’ seeks to involve those most marginalised and to build trust and relationship.
- The promotion of **leadership** that is ‘socially just’ in schools is required if schools are to move from ‘reproductive agents’ to ‘transformative agents’.

The 'scaffolding', emerging from this research process, focuses on balancing the action-oriented elements of parental involvement that Irish schools are more used to with an approach that is grounded in dialogue and reflection. It is part of the building analogy already used. This research has opened the door, informed by the work of Epstein and Lynch and Lodge. Values underpin the foundations and these must be identified as part of a process in the school. The other elements of the building can vary from school to school but the Voices of the school community occupants can identify these elements. The building blocks can only be made secure and brought to life through a strong, inclusive, socially just leadership, which includes an emphasis on balancing action with dialogue and reflective process.

This 'building process' can only be made secure and brought to life by its occupants. All occupants have a Voice in the process and depending on the particular Voices, each building will have unique variations and style detail and the occupants should together develop their 'building manual'.

The proposed model here identifies the 'foundation stones'. There are also a number of 'thematic bricks' identified although these could change depending on the occupants own dialogue, reflection and actions. In terms of rolling the model out it is envisaged that a practice manual could be developed for each of the 'foundation stones' and 'thematic bricks' but always with scope for contribution and development from the school community itself, recognising that it is in the *process* of the dialogue and work that the change will occur. Schools should also view this model as a living entity that needs to be constantly reviewed based on changes to the parent population, changes to staff, disengagement by some parents from the school, challenges experienced at staff level, changes at leadership level etc. The model should be viewed as a fluid tool that does not necessarily facilitate a beginning, middle and end task

oriented approach but rather a scaffolding to facilitate on-going dialogue, action, reflection and review.

The values and principles of a school's parental involvement require discussion at a number of levels within the school and must contain the parents' voices. This will be challenging in a context where there are different parental views however if practice is to be really inclusive these are the discussions that need to happen. This requires time and commitment and an understanding that there may initially be some disagreement.

Each of the thematic bricks and foundation stones are inter-connected, feed in and out of each other and impact on the effectiveness of each other in creating meaningful parental involvement. This model is designed to create an on-going dialogue which takes a cognisance of the current situation in schools and the power distance that exists. The legal framework supports this but schools and parents appear to require some practical framework to guide them in the dialogue that is required. This process could be supported by a range of organisations outside of the school site such as the local Community, the NPC, ET.

Further work on this model could include the completion of the practice manual and then testing it in a pilot project in a range of schools under differing patronage systems and in differing socio-economic contexts.

## **Evaluation of research design and process**

The researcher retains the view that the presented theoretical framework is appropriate, significant and highly important in relation to the research. The emphasis in the findings on 'power', 'power distance', 'expert power', 'leadership' 'identified cultural differences' and 'the gap between what legislation provides for and what actually occurs' reiterates the importance of a critical exploration. The use of a case study approach yielded rich and plentiful data, which was context specific in terms of the two school sites but interestingly many themes were echoed in the overarching interviews, albeit with a different emphasis or a different perspective.

The researcher is of the view that the comparative element was impacted by the timing of the interviews in the second school and by the amount of interviews that could be carried out on that site. This formed an on-going discussion as part of the research process and it was felt strongly that there was an ethical dimension to facilitating School B as both Educate Together and the school itself had demonstrated an interest in the research and had agreed to participate. Also the barrier to participation in School B appeared to be a combination of concern about the substantive matter itself and the school's 'emergency status' and elements of how the leadership worked in the school at Board level. This is a limitation to the study however albeit compensated somewhat by the inclusion of the overarching interviews.

The 'Questerviews' and 'Semi Structured Interview' templates were designed to facilitate participants to comment on the different elements comprising this research i.e. 'Parental Involvement', 'Leadership and Leading' and 'Social Inclusion and Equality'. The Parental Involvement section was to explore some of what Epstein had identified as essential

elements for effective parental involvement, what the legislative framework provided for, how the participants actually experienced Parental Involvement in their context, how it was thought about at parent, school staff, school management and school leadership level, whether there was a jointly worked through statement of intention and what structures were in place to support parental involvement. The intention of this was to explore what is espoused in the literature and what is the experience at local and national level according to the voices of the participants. The researcher's initial intention around analysis of the 'Questerviews' particularly required amendment due to how the interviews with the participants proceeded. There was a high level of variety in answers, emerging issues that participants wanted to highlight and more discussion with some participants than envisaged. Given the sensitivity around the substantive matter the researcher facilitated this. The researcher assumed a very facilitative and conversational style at times with participants, particularly with some of the parents who appeared nervous initially.

Given the fact that the observation could not be facilitated in School B, the researcher does not focus on that data in School A. However the data from the observation in School A reinforces and validates the findings that emerge through the 'Questerviews' and the 'Semi-structured interviews'.

With regard to participants, an interview with a representative of the IPPN and HSCL at national level would undoubtedly have contributed further insight and additional perspective to the research. Also as identified in Chapter 3 it was hoped that a random selection of parents would be possible. School A were sent and asked to display a poster requesting parents interested in being part of the study to contact the researcher (Appendix 3). The school approached the researcher stating

that they didn't think this would yield any participants and advised that the HSCL recruit the six-eight parents requested. School B identified that the HSCL would recruit 3 parents to be part of the study. This raises the issue, as with other studies focusing on parental involvement, that those who participated were already part of the school and so may be less likely to be critical or to observe gaps. In fact School A particularly recruited a parent who was not involved in the school and the HSCL was actively attempting to engage in school courses and to improve communication with her. One of the participants in School B found it very challenging to participate in the 'Questerview'—both from a comprehension and a confidence perspective. She commented at the end on how delighted she was to have been able to do it. This participant restricted the 'Questerview' to 10 minutes at the start but did spend 18 minutes with the researcher. The other two participants appeared to have no difficulty engaging in a critique of parental involvement both from the perspective of the school and parents.

The stated relevance of the research in the realm of contributing to the equality agenda now appears somewhat overstated and perhaps slightly naïve. It is an ambitious context to set the research in. However the analysis of parental involvement within the Lynch and Lodge framework clearly identifies how inequality around parents and schools can occur, despite the legislative support for it. Given the evidence connecting parents, children and schools with positive education experience it could certainly form a key part of the solution to inequalities within the system. It is the researcher's view that this requires further exploration in additional studies.

The commitment regarding confidentiality limits the use of the data from this research process. However it is unlikely that the research could have proceeded without it.

## **Recommendations**

Outside of informing practice there are some other key recommendations from this research. The researcher views these as items that could be addressed external to the process of the 'scaffolding' being rolled out, piloted and tested. Given the existing structures surrounding these recommendations they are less of an integrated approach but rather recommendations that could be addressed 'in the meantime' but are required nonetheless:

- At national level the definition of the word 'primary' in the constitution and Education Act requires clarity.
- The DES, given the priority on parental involvement at policy and constitutional level, need to review the school working day to ensure there is scope and time for the work required for meaningful parental involvement to be done. The time allocated currently is focused solely on the children's learning activities.
- Schools at local level need to continue to work creatively with the time allocated to them to ensure there is a priority on parental involvement in the day to day activities of the school but also in the school's organisational development and infrastructure.
- The DES should review composition and capacity at BOMs to ensure that their role in supporting, and when required, challenging the principal's view of parental involvement is possible.
- Colleges of Education should include a module on parental involvement in teacher training. This could include rationale for parental involvement, how to practically involve parents and Community in a teacher's work, how to receive feedback from parents and Community, reflection on the potential challenges of

this work, reflection on the emotional response and investment to this work.

- IPPN should work with principals around leadership support and training in relation to parental involvement. The importance of self-care and self-reflection in a principal's position and for school staff require a focus and debate.

## **Final conclusion**

This research explored parental involvement with an emphasis on leading the involvement in areas of designated disadvantage. It identifies the nature of parental involvement in two settings and explores this further with a number of key interviewees. The emphasis on the principal's role in leading parental involvement is a challenging concept for schools in all areas with particular characteristics in areas of designated disadvantage. There may be some additional 'engagement strategies' required in those areas due to the population composition and the additional complexities that can entail.

The research identifies a range of key findings under the areas of parental involvement, leading parental involvement and inequality in relation to parental involvement. It makes a number of recommendations at local and national level. This research concludes with a practical framework or scaffolding to support the creation of meaningful parental involvement. This was designed by drawing together elements of the literature review, addressing some of the findings emerging from the research and based on the philosophical underpinnings of this research process. This model is intended to contribute to professional practice in a way that facilitates a change in



how the current required partnership of schools and parents in Ireland operates. It is this change that will facilitate parents and schools to move beyond their current partnership arrangement, which based on the findings of this research, is one where the parents are largely “The Silent Partners.”

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