DAY IN DAY OUT: A CASE STUDY OF POOR ATTENDANCE AT PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL A STUDY IN AN EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED SETTING

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctorate in Education (EdD) is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Abstract

Attending school is a significant experience during the course of a person's lifetime. It contributes to the foundation of emotional, social, cognitive, moral and spiritual development, particularly at pre-school and primary school levels. Despite its importance, it is not available to all children equally and this phenomenon mirrors broader societal inequalities. During the past three decades in Ireland there has been much discourse and financial investment focusing on educational disadvantage, yet it remains an intractable problem for society. This thesis provides one lens through which educational disadvantage can be investigated: school absenteeism at primary level in schools located in an area designated as disadvantaged. The research provides information on: 1) the attendance of 306 students in one school-year and 2) the experience and perceptions of seven key personnel dealing with school absenteeism on a daily basis. The inquiry was conducted in a systematic way to ensure the validity of the findings and a contribution to the knowledge already available on absenteeism in primary level schools. The research adopts a case study research strategy and applied a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design.

The study traces the key concepts underpinning absenteeism in Irish and international literature as the substantive focus of the thesis. The broader frame locates the issue of school absenteeism within inequality of education and educational disadvantage using an interdisciplinary approach. This work considers public policy in relation to Irish education, educational disadvantage and school attendance with a particular focus on relevant legislation and policy implementation.

Having established that there is a serious problem of poor attendance in some Irish primary schools a key conclusion of this research is that while the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) provides the legislative and policy mechanism to curtail the extent of absenteeism at primary level, serious attention needs to be given to its full implementation. Despite the high levels of absenteeism in schools designated as disadvantaged there is evidence of a strong and definite commitment to prevent and curtail this phenomenon within the educational system. It is evident from the interviews that this is a key area of concern for all the personnel involved.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THESIS

This thesis examines poor school attendance. The study investigates poor attendance at primary level in schools located in an area designated as disadvantaged[1]. The focus of this inquiry is on the prevalence of absenteeism in these schools and on the experience of implementing statutory responses and strategies dealing with this problem. The concept of absenteeism is explored through an analysis of the theoretical understandings available in Irish and international literature using an interdisciplinary approach. The wider problem of inequality in education provides the broad framework, with the initial focus of the literature and policy reviews exploring concepts of equality, inequality of education and educational disadvantage. This work further considers public policy in relation to Irish education and educational disadvantage with a particular focus on policy implementation.

The research provides systematically collected data on: (a) the attendance pattern of 306 students in one school-year and (b) the experience and perceptions of seven key personnel dealing with school absenteeism on a daily basis. The research adopts a case study research strategy and applied a mixed-methods sequential

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[1] The Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage at primary level was introduced in 1984 in disadvantaged areas. Schools seeking disadvantaged status were assessed and prioritised as to need on the basis of socio-economic and educational indicators such as unemployment levels, housing, medical card holders and information on basic literacy and numeracy. Band 1 & 2 Schools: are designated as disadvantaged under DEIS and classified as Band 1 (most disadvantaged), and Band 2 (highly disadvantaged).

explanatory design. The research is conducted in two phases: Phase 1 involves the extraction of data from primary school roll books over one academic year and Phase 2 includes semi-structured interviews with seven key personnel with responsibilities in relation to school attendance. The aim of the research is to identify the factual details of absenteeism among students attending schools designated as educationally disadvantaged and to outline the experiences of implementing statutory responses to this phenomenon. This introductory chapter outlines: (a) the rationale for undertaking the study; (b) the structure of the thesis including a brief outline of each chapter and (c) the author's perspective and voice.

Why Study School Absenteeism Now?

Educational qualifications are a crucial determinant of later life-chances across Western societies including Ireland. There has been a significant increase in general participation in formal education in Ireland over the past four decades. There has also been a significant investment by the State to improve access to education by all children. However, there is much evidence that many children are not benefiting from the education system. This is in part due to poor attendance which can reflect general disengagement with school and can be associated with early school leaving, academic underperformance and more restricted opportunities in terms of further education, training and the labour market (Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2007;

Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson & Kirk, 2003; McCoy, Darmody, Smyth & Dunne, 2007). The Combat Poverty Agency[2] (CPA, 2003) described educational disadvantage as a relative term and this has implications as it becomes more the norm to participate and benefit from education.

The intractable problem of educational disadvantage has been the subject of much discourse and deliberation among all education stakeholders and general Irish society. Educational disadvantage is most comprehensively understood as the inability to derive an equal benefit from education (as a result of social, economic, cultural, environmental, school and system factors), which results in disadvantage, inside and outside the formal educational system, in the form of underachievement within the school system, low literacy levels, early school leaving, and exclusion from secure, well-paid employment, adequate housing, services and lifelong learning (Kelleghan, Weir, ó hUallacháin & Morgan, 1995). The link between educational disadvantage and poverty is uncontested by many educationalists in Ireland today (Downes & Gilligan, 2007). Much interdisciplinary research work has been undertaken with a focus on family poverty and links with educational disadvantage

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[2] The Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) was established by legislation in 1986 to provide policy advice to the Minister for Social and Family Affairs on all aspects of poverty. In July 2009 the CPA was integrated with the Office for Social Inclusion to form the Social Inclusion Division within the Department of Social and Family Affairs. In May 2010 the Social Inclusion Division was transferred to the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs.

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(Archer, 2001; Daly & Leonard, 2002; Department of Education and Science [DES] 2005a; Smyth & McCoy, 2009; St. Vincent de Paul Society [SVP], 2002).

Within this broader context this study focuses on one indicator of educational disadvantage: poor attendance. In recent decades, school absenteeism has attracted much interest in international educational research as well as policy discourses (Malcolm et al., 2003; Reid, 2003; 2005). There is a general consensus among researchers that poor attendance has substantial costs for the individual and for wider society. On the individual level, persistent school absence is likely to lead to early school leaving and social as well as economic disadvantage later in life. On a societal level, persistent absence from school and subsequent early school leaving can be associated with becoming engaged in criminal activity (Robins & Radcliffe, 1980) and high levels of unemployment. In other words, persistent absence from school is costly to the individual as well as to the State (Darmody et al., 2007).

In Ireland, the fourth in a series of reports based on data collected by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) on non-attendance in primary and post-primary schools provides information on school attendance returns for 2007/8 and compares these figures with the previous four years (Millar, 2010). According to this report, annual percentage student days lost in 2007/8 were 6.5% in primary and about 7.7% in post-primary schools. This implies that, on average, each primary student missed 12 days per year and each post-primary student missed 13 days per year. The proportion of students in primary school absent 20 days or more is as high as 12%; the corresponding figure at post-primary level is 16.9%. Millar pointed out that, "the percentage of twenty-day absences continued in the range of approximately

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11-12% in primary schools and 16-18% in post primary schools" (p.6). The 2007/8 figure for primary schools was at the top of the range, while for post-primary the figure was lower for 2007/8 than for the previous year. It is worth noting here that the figure for 2006/7 (coinciding with the year in which my study was carried out) was 10.9% for over twenty days absent in primary schools. This figure is close to my figure of 10.2% absenteeism for the schools in this study.

As indicated by this picture of absenteeism by Millar (2010), it is clear that non-attendance at primary level requires further interrogation. This topic is seen as important because attendance at primary school is an indicator of further education and life-chances (McCoy et al., 2007). Attendance at school contributes to the foundation of emotional, social, cognitive, moral and spiritual development, particularly at pre-school and primary school levels (Daly, 2005). The rationale for selecting this focus includes the realisation of the importance of school attendance.

There is also an opportunity to review the relatively recently-enacted legislation and policy initiatives that have been put in place to address the problem of poor attendance. The specific focus in the policy review is on the implementation of strategies as envisaged through the enactment of the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000). The Act was seen as a systematically-designed approach to addressing the issue of non-attendance through providing a statutory framework for addressing student absenteeism (McCoy et al., 2007). However, as pointed out by McCoy et al. (2007) there has been little focused research in the Irish context on the nature of poor attendance. This is particularly true in the primary

school context. This small scale study hopes to contribute in a limited fashion to the knowledge of absenteeism in educationally disadvantaged primary schools.

Summary of Thesis Structure and Contents

Having presented the rationale for the selection of the research topic the following outline of the chapters provides the rationale for the approach taken to this investigation. Chapter 2 begins with a review of the literature on inequality, educational disadvantage and school attendance internationally. It then narrows to a specific focus on school absenteeism in Ireland. The chapter outlines a number of shifts that have taken place, especially in the 1990s, in understandings and practices of equality strategies. These shifts have been influenced by several factors including innovative ways of conceptualising justice, equality and human rights (Zappone, 2003). The historical debates regarding the nature of economic development and distribution and redistribution are highlighted and traced to the development of equality concepts such as inclusion and difference. There is also a focus on the relationship between social class and resistance theories and early school leaving and absenteeism. The active concepts of self-withdrawal and disengagement are explored and considered adopting a rights-based approach.

Chapter 3 presents a review of relevant legislation and policy initiatives in Ireland in relation to educational disadvantage and narrows to school attendance with a particular focus on the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) and its implementation. This review is framed by the general political, social and cultural context and includes the broader objective of the 'joined up' policy approach adopted by recent Irish Government departments (McCarthy, 2005; National Economic and

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Social Council [NESC], 2005). The main tendencies, patterns, key moments and

significant developments in education reform are linked to other relevant national

strategies that impinge on the subject of this study.

Chapter 4 presents the research strategy, design and methodology and includes

a rationale for the approach adopted, assumptions made, ethical considerations and

the perceived limitations of the study. The theoretical worldview applied is

pragmatism as it "draws on many ideas, including applying 'what works,' using

diverse approaches, and valuing both objective and subjective knowledge" (Creswell

& Plano Clark, 2007, p. 43). This disciplined inquiry applied a mixed-methods

sequential explanatory design. The sequential procedure allowed the researcher to

seek and elaborate on and expand the findings of one method with another method

(Creswell, 2003). These methods involved two phases with Phase 1 providing the

systematic review of quantitative data on the phenomenon of school attendance and

Phase 2 providing additional qualitative data based on the views and perceptions of

the key school and agency personnel that interact with school absenteeism on a daily

basis. Finally the mixing of methods at the interpretation stage allowed for a depth to

the inquiry that the serious topic of absenteeism deserves.

Chapter 5 is a sequenced presentation of the findings from Phase 1 and 2. It

begins with contextual details of the junior and senior primary schools involved in

the study. The analysis of the data is presented as if the school is one entity to assist

the identification of patterns and trends across all primary school grades over the

school year. The data collected provides information on 306 pupils attending these

schools in 2006/2007 and their pattern of attendance under the headings of student's

grade and gender and periods of absence such as the day of the week and time of the year.

Building on Phase 1 and aiming to acquire further knowledge on the subject of school absenteeism at primary level, Phase 2 included semi-structured interviews with seven people in key positions (direct and indirect) in the schools. The participants were asked to respond, based on their experience, to a set of questions guided by key themes, identified in Phase 1, and a subsequent set of related sub-themes. The four key themes included: 1) patterns and trends in primary school absenteeism; 2) the implementation of the legislation (Education (Welfare) Act, Government of Ireland, 2000); 3) prevention and intervention strategies and 4) recommendations for future practice and policy. The responses provide a narrative under each theme, interspersed with relevant quotes from the interviews, where pertinent.

Chapter 6 is an attempt to integrate and connect findings from Phase 1 and 2 with the literature and policy chapters. The structure of the chapter is designed to capture the primary learning from the thesis. As in the other related chapters the substantive subject of absenteeism is framed by the context of inequality in education and educational disadvantage. The learning from the thesis is discussed by focusing on the prevalence and patterns of absenteeism in the sample schools and the experiences of implementing the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) and polices to prevent and lessen poor attendance.

The final chapter draws together the learning from this research study and highlights recommendations. Having established that there is a serious problem of

poor attendance in some Irish primary schools a key conclusion of this research is that the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) provides the legislative and policy mechanisms to curtail the extent of absenteeism at primary level but serious attention needs to be given to its implementation to make substantial progress. This is presented as a positive prospect given the apparent commitment to improve the services for vulnerable children and their families through integrated services. The formal formation in June, 2011 of a full Department for Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) is an example of the commitment to this reform (DCYA, 2011).

Authors Perspective and Voice

My values as a researcher and a community development worker have shaped the choice of topic, the design of the research and the presentation of the thesis. I have always had a personal and professional interest in education and its importance in society. My early childhood experiences imprinted on me the value of education along with the awareness of the class divide in accessing education. In addition, I had early exposure to the struggle for fairness and equality in the delivery of public service for the public good. This interest in class-based inequality influenced me to follow a career in social work, applying a community development approach. During the past 30 years I have experienced a range of opportunities and challenges in my working life towards lessening educational disadvantage. In addition, having seen my children's journey through to third level education this further confirmed for me that even though there have been many initiatives, legislative changes and education

reforms it is still very difficult for children of families that haven't benefited from education to reach their full potential.

I pursued the idea of returning to education to study the educational disadvantage module of the doctorate in education programme in St Patrick's College as I had a desire to build on the theoretical, formal and informal experiences of my various roles and responsibilities. The combination of the coursework and the self-directed learning through the dissertation was very attractive to me as someone returning to the formal education sector. By obtaining an understanding of policy frameworks and their application in disadvantage within international 'social movements' I was provided with an exciting and enlightening basis upon which to undertake this research. The manner in which these were linked nationally with educational discourses, policies and practices, with particular reference to their implications for planning, reform and improvements in targeting disadvantage provided the much needed focus for this study.

Even though studying within the discipline of education was a new challenge for me I held the conviction, and still do, that it is only when we have the cross-fertilization of training and research that we will be able to truly perform our public service in an integrated and joined-up fashion. I had gained sufficient professional confidence through my work-life experiences to undertake this study and to pursue my search for broad system change. My primary motivator is the belief that the child and family must be at the centre of policies and services that involve them and that it is only through genuine sharing of perspectives we might arrive at a respectful and more equitable education system.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a literature review on absenteeism in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The review will clarify the concept of absenteeism through an analysis of some of the theoretical understandings available in Irish and international literature using an interdisciplinary approach. The wider problem of inequality within education will provide the broad framework for this study and the initial focus of the literature review will explore equality, inequality of education and educational disadvantage. The final section in this chapter explores the literature on policy implementation and integrated responses.

This chapter will inform the analysis of legislation and policy in the next chapter specifically focused on policy development in relation to absenteeism. These chapters naturally interlink as much policy results from the design and implementation of legislation usually formulated as a result of heightened awareness, previous research and prior knowledge of a given subject. The review also refers to a number of research studies which have informed the theoretical understandings of educational disadvantage and poor attendance.

Understandings of Equality

There are a range of understandings of the term equality as my investigation of the interdisciplinary literature will demonstrate. The "discourse on equality brings into play the intersecting categories of class, gender, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation and the linked spheres of public and private life" (Lyons & Waldron,

2005, p.1). Much benefit may be obtained by exploring assumptions that make up the

social constructs of the modern and post-modern world. Discussions that include

how we are and how we go about our business should include reference to the moral

order of society. Taylor (2004) traced the new vision of moral order back to the

theories of Natural Law which emerged in the seventeenth century, largely as a

response to the domestic and international disorder wrought by the wars of religion.

Taylor also cited Grotius and Locke as being the most important theorists of Natural

Law, with Grotius "seeing human beings as rational, sociable agents who are meant

to collaborate in peace to their mutual benefit" (p.3). Taylor argued that from the

time of Locke "although the contract language may fall away, and be used by only a

minority of theorists, the underlying idea of society as existing for the (mutual)

benefit of individuals and the defence of their rights takes on more and more

importance"(p.4). He pointed out that this thinking had given a firm basis for

political institutions even if it has gone through *a double expansion* through the

intensity of its use and the demands on it.

The equality debate in the twentieth century centred on 'socio-economic'

inequality and class, due mainly to the imbalance of wealth ownership in western

countries and the prevalence of high unemployment. This led to the central

positioning of an economic or material understanding of equality/inequality and was

upheld also by the moral philosophy of utilitarianism, the liberal political theory of

Rawls and the Marxist, socialist and feminist traditions shaping a more radical

understanding of an egalitarian society (Zappone, 2001). The utilitarian argument

proposed that rich people should transfer some of their income to poor people

because this could increase the utility or happiness of the poor person, without substantially decreasing the happiness of the rich person.

Embedded in a distributive theory of justice and equality is the assumption that our sameness to one another is the deciding element that justifies equal treatment and respect. While the focus is on how goods are distributed, little attention is placed on how the differences in economic resources impact on capacities and opportunities. This leads to a consideration of the work of Amartya Sen. His emphasis on *differential need* confronted the attractive simplicities embedded in earlier theories. Young concurs with Sen "I find focus on distribution of goods or income *per se* too limited a way of evaluating justice or well-being" (Young, 2000, p.32). Young further elaborated "Because of their differing attributes or situations, some people need more or different kinds of goods to enable equal levels of capability with others" (2000, p32).

For these theorists, equality refers, not primarily to the distribution of social goods but above all, to the full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society's major institutions. Their work requires the socially supportive opportunity for all people to develop and exercise their capabilities and realise their choices. The social choice theory of Sen, whereby each person is empowered to take responsibility for his/her own preferences is linked to the capacities in each individual (Sen & Foster, 1997). According to Sen and Foster:

> If the objective is to concentrate on the individual's real
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> opportunity to pursue her objectives, then account would have to be
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> taken not just of the primary goods the person holds but also of the

relevant personal characteristics that govern the *conversion* of

primary goods into the person's ability to promote her ends. (p.198)

Sen linked this notion to his *functionings* theory which referred to the various

things a person may value doing or being. These valued functionings may vary from

basic ones such as food to more complex ones such as self-respect. The focus on this

capability approach could be either on *realized* functionings or on a set of

alternatives a person has which could be equated to real opportunities. Sen explained

that "The perspective of human capability focuses, ...on the ability – the substantive

freedom – of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the

real choices they have"(1999, p. 293). Sen recognised Rawls expansion from a focus

on primary goods to the inclusion of income but viewed even this expansion as too

narrow a frame to "...deal with all the relevant variations in the relationship between

resources and functionings" (Sen, 1997, p. 393). Sen advocated that "inequality

comparisons will yield very different results depending on whether we concentrate

only on incomes or also on the impact of other economic and social influences on the

quality of life" (Sen, 1997, p.389).

Sen connected his theoretical understanding of equality with an individual's

lifestyle and /or well being. He explained that the worth of incomes cannot stand

separated from deeper concerns and that a society that respects individual well-being

and freedom must take note of these concerns in making interpersonal comparisons

as well as assessment of social situations (Sen, 1997). In advocating for the

importance of understanding individual capabilities, Sen explained that the

relationship between income (and other resources) on the one hand and individual

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achievements and freedoms on the other is not constant. The lifestyles experienced by individuals are influenced by different types of contingencies that lead to systematic variations in the conversion of incomes into the distinct functionings that are achieved or, put another way, the various things we can do or be (Sen, 1997).

This primacy of focus on the individual by Sen has led to critiques by theorists from other disciplines; however, Sen defends the criticism of his social choice theory by explaining that in fact his focus on capabilities recognises individual social and capital differences while holding a focus on inequality as a central theme (Sen, 1989). Sen connected the modern focus on quality of life with "conditions of living" (Sen, 1997, p. 392). In addition, Sen broadened the original social choice framework as he viewed it as inadequate as it left little room for distributive considerations such as equality. Sen argued for the need for certain equity or distributive factors to be satisfied or otherwise "We can have complete equality of the chosen index of primary goods, and yet some people may be immensely more deprived than others because of age, disabilities, proneness to illness, epidemiological conditions, and so on" (Sen, 1997, p. 393). Outlining Sen's theory in this thesis, where the focus is on educational inequality through a multidisciplinary frame, offers us an opportunity to explore the basis of what determines equality in society and opens a way for considerations of recent deliberations of the theory of liberal egalitarianism.

Modern egalitarianism advocated for more equality of income and equality of production, involving democratic control of the economy and of the workplace, and the right of everyone not just to some kind of work, but to work which is safe, dignified, useful, and engaging (Baker, 1987). There are interesting connections of

perspectives of the various disciplines through the work of Sen in relation to well-being and Baker in relation to *equality of condition*. Even though the former comes from an economic and philosophical perspective and Baker is a political philosopher they offer similar critiques of early theorists such as Rawls and share some understandings of the historical theoretical frameworks for considering equality (Baker, 2005; Sen, 1997, 1999).

The need for an interdisciplinary approach to the theorising on equality influenced the setting up of the Equality Studies Centre at University College Dublin (UCD), founded in 1989, to bring "together sociologists, political theorists, lawyers, economists, feminists and policy analysts, each with a unique contribution to make to the understanding of equality and social justice" Lynch (1999, p. 42). According to Lynch this was an example of an attempt to form "both an inter-disciplinary and a pluri-disciplinary project around the study of equality issues" and reflected an outlook "that no single discipline provided a comprehensive view of the complex subject of equality, or indeed an adequate analysis of how to address inequalities and injustices as they arose" (1999, p.42). An additional "generative force" for the creation of the Centre was due to the recognised failure of "...liberal public policies to promote radical social change in society in the post-war era" (Lynch, 1999, p.42).

In the context of these developments it is worth highlighting the specific similarities between Sen and Baker (and his colleagues) and the potential implications of this theoretical frame to assist schools to engage with their students experiencing social marginalisation. In *Development as Freedom* (1999) Sen acknowledged the foundational aspect of seeing incomes and commodities as the

material basis of our well-being. However, as mentioned earlier, Sen pointed to the importance of assessing what advantages (and freedoms) are accrued from this income. He outlined five distinct sources of variation that need to be considered when examining equality. These include: 1) Personal differences, such as physical conditions such as age, gender, disability and illness; 2) Environmental diversities such as the effects of climate change and or wind borne diseases; 3) Social condition variations including public education and health and safety conditions; 4) Relational perspective differences such as the social norms of individuals within a particular community or society and 5) Distribution within the family, as this may not be undertaken in a way that advantages all family members on an equal basis (Sen, 1999, pp. 70,71). This broad categorisation provides a complementary framework that can be placed in dialogue with the five key dimensions that constitute equality of condition, identified as essential for radical egalitarianism through the work of Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh (2004, 2009).

Baker defined equality of condition as concerned with "respect and recognition; resources; love, care and solidarity; power; working and learning" (2005, p.15). In his article: *The Philosophy and Politics of Equality of Condition* (2005) Baker expanded on each of the five dimensions of the philosophy of equality of condition. The first dimension, namely, respect and recognition where Baker called for critical inter-culturalism; an acceptance of diversity and critical dialogue over cultural differences, connects to both Sen's understanding of personal *heterogeneities* and his exploration of differences in relational perspectives. The second dimension that Baker elaborated is related to the area of equality of resources.

Here again, there are concurrences between his call for substantial equality of resources leading to roughly equal prospects of well-being and Sen's challenge for the need to examine distribution within the family "...if well-being or freedom of individuals" is to be realised (1999, p.71). One further point in the comparative analysis, pertinent to this thesis, is the condition that Baker elaborated under the heading working and learning, where he emphasised the importance of all contexts of learning and the need for restructured systems of learning. This has similarities to Sen's challenge to examine variation in social climate (pp.71-72). Once more, Sen concurs that "quality of life is influenced also by social conditions, including public educational arrangements ... and the nature of community relationships" (p.71). Both of these frameworks offer a depth to our theoretical understanding of equality. In addition, both Sen (1997, 1999) and Baker (2005) propose a move from a liberal commitment to equal rights and privileges for all citizens to a concept of society which appreciates and accepts difference and supports a critical dialogue through clear democratic means, something I will return to in the discussion (Chapter 6) of this thesis.

Zappone reminds us that the shifts that took place in understandings and practices of social change and equality strategies have been influenced by several factors including innovative ways of conceptualising justice, equality and human rights and new ways of theorising about difference and identity. Post-modern egalitarianism and philosophical thought provided new meanings of the socially-constructed categories of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and disability. They developed out of group struggles over socially-valued resources and ongoing debates

regarding the nature of economic development and the place of distribution, redistribution or material equality within development (Baker et al., 2009; Zappone, 2001). As indicated, these changes resulted in new ideas being associated with equality including concepts such as inclusion, difference, identity and citizenship. As explained earlier, examining the concept of equality benefits from a multifaceted and multidimensional approach as it is concerned with economic, social, political, and philosophical complexity and as a result there are enormous challenges to be faced in embracing equality. These challenges include respect for the multiple identities[3] of all people living in Ireland while at the same time understanding basic and often competing rights (Sen, 1973; Sen & Foster, 1997). The implications of this theoretical investigation for the thesis will be further expanded in the examination of inequality in education where I focus on the developments of the equality framework (five dimensions) and how the Equality Studies Centre aimed to treat "...the subject of equality within education in a holistic manner" (Baker et al., 2009, p. 143).

Understandings of Inequality within Education

According to the CPA (2003) inequalities in educational participation and achievement reflected a wide range of social and economic inequalities in Irish society and a widening gap between the better off and the less well off. The Agency

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[3] Defined by Zappone (2003, p.3) as: "Multiple characteristics and membership of more than one social group structure, the unique experiences and identity of individuals".

claimed that where there was greater socio-economic inequality, there was an increased likelihood of educational inequality.

Much theoretical analysis of inequality in education has been undertaken within the sociology of education. Over time, the critique from the Equality Studies provided a new frame by which this analysis could be undertaken. As stated already, this framework has many similarities to that provided by Sen and offers the author of this thesis a way of engaging with the theoretical concepts and relating them to educational disadvantage and poor school attendance. To assist this task I outline the four dimensions by which the Equality Studies Centre examined inequality within education. They included: 1) equality in education and related resources; 2) equality of respect and recognition; 3) equality of power and 4) equality of love, care and solidarity (Baker et al., 2009, pp. 143, 144). It is worth considering three of these here (resources, recognition and power) as they are the most pertinent to this thesis.

The first of these relates to a person's access to and successful participation in education and the fact that this is "generally dependent on having the economic resources to avail fully of the opportunities that education can offer" (Baker et al., p. 144). This dimension is a clear example of how equality of education cannot be considered separately from economic equality. This is further exacerbated through the effects of globalisation and how education has become a market commodity. The fact that the credentials one holds play an increasingly powerful role in determining life chances has added to the intensity of the competitive market forces (Baker et al.). This manifests itself as a social class problem in education, "a problem of unequal access, participation and outcome arising from unequal access to resources" (Baker

et al., p. 145). This analysis connects with the literature on poverty and social exclusion which indicates the importance of overall equality for the pursuit of educational equality. Baker et al. (2009) explained that even where there is a comprehensively designed state sector, people with greater economic capital are able to purchase "valued credentialised cultural capital" (p.151) and thereby perpetuate cycles of class advantage. As Lynch (2005) has pointed out this problem requires an external solution rather than a solution that is internal to the education system.

Conversely to the latter point the task of resolving inequalities in education relating to the lack of respect and recognition is much more amenable to action within education itself. This dimension refers to respect for the values, beliefs and lifestyles of others. According to Baker et al., it involves both the formal study of the promotion of the principle of inclusion itself and the "adoption of difference-respectful procedures and processes" in order to challenge inequalities of respect and recognition (2009, p. 161). The underlying premise here is that education is a very powerful cultural institution and thereby has the ability to promote and ensure active inclusion. However, success within this dimension is also dependent on wider reform of cultural and social relations such as the media, workplaces, law and politics (Baker et al.).

The inequality of power relations is increasingly regarded as having a profound impact on education systems as it is widely recognised that education has not managed to promote basic forms of equality (Lynch, 2005). There are two distinct levels at which equality of power may be a problem in education. Firstly, at the macro level, it concerns the institutional procedures for decision-making in relation

to school management, curriculum planning, policy development and implementation. Secondly, at the micro level, it concerns the internal life of educational institutions such as the relations between staff and students and among the staff themselves. These levels point to the importance of power and control as issues that are endemic to the operation of education and can be linked to the process of authority (Baker et al., 2009).

Lynch (2005) highlighted the way education acts as an agent of social stratification and the role of middle and upper classes in maintaining their relative position, negating the equalising tendencies within education through the purchase of educational privilege. In Ireland the educational system is a highly segregated one, according to Lynch (2005). She identified power as an equality problematic within the education system at all levels (2005). According to Lynch "...if the (Irish) educational system was democratised it would not only challenge the power imbalances inherent in the current structures but would allow the students to develop the understanding and skills necessary for democratic citizenship" (2005, p.154).

The power relationships that dominate educational discourse are rarely examined or challenged. Despite the rhetoric concerning parental choice and stakeholder involvement, people from marginalised groupings encounter substantial difficulties in having their voices heard. Even where these voices are heard it is still relatively easy for policy makers and professionals to sideline these views in pursuit of greater efficiency or the efficient allocation of scarce resources.

People must be labelled before these resources can be accessed (Shelvin & Rose, 2003). The effects of this categorisation, though well intentioned, can be to

further marginalise and alienate people already excluded from the mainstream of society. An example of this disempowerment can be seen in the *Encouraging Voices* research project (Shevlin & Rose, 2003) as a dominant theme identified was the powerlessness of children in relation to the adult world. Shevlin and Rose (2003, p.294) pointed out that: "Children are keenly aware of the inequality in child-adult power relations within schools". They referred to student's account of their experiences that included a lack of privacy and autonomy in everyday school life and recommended the creation of a democratic 'listening culture' within schools as an obvious first step to re-balancing power relations (p.294). The authors recognised the attempts to tackle this issue through the formation of school councils (at post primary levels), however, they remained doubtful as to whether the creation of student councils might seriously address the issues raised by young people from marginalised groupings in relation to the imbalanced power relationships they experience within schools. This links with Lynch's view that implementing change in education systems can involve simplistic assumptions that ignore the reality of how decisions are made and implemented in schools. Shevlin and Rose (2004, p.294) called for a radical approach and recommended "...greater analysis of the complexities of encouraging and affirming voices traditionally suppressed, and enabling these voices to have significant impact on school policy and practice". The aligning of egalitarian principles would require a commitment to participatory democracy at all levels within the education system.

The work of Unterhalter helps to connect the understandings of inequality in education, described above, with Sen as she believes that Sen provides "...a new

language to understand important social and economic processes" and for the connections across disciplines to allow "...the implications of Sen's work for examining practical approaches to social justice" (2003, p.665) to emerge. Unterhalter has studied the potential of the capability approach for work in education as she identified a gap as:

> While Sen's ideas have posed some central questions for debates in philosophy concerning equality, for discussions on social choice in economics, and for the reframing of the definition of 'development' in development studies, his work has had surprisingly little impact on discussions in sociology of education. (Unterhalter, 2003, p.665)

Unterhalter has a background in academic education studies and similar to Sen has focused on development studies. She explained that before considering what some of the potential of Sen's thinking is for sociologists of education, some elements of his thinking need explanation. This includes an understanding that Sen's ethical individual approach should not be read as implying a lack of concern with social conditions. Conversely, Unterhalter viewed the analysis of social formations as key to Sen's thinking, but understood that due partly to his lack of focus on the "...issue of complex social division or social change, both of central concern to many sociologists, his writing on education, for example, often comes across as insufficiently nuanced" (Unterhalter, 2003, p.668). In spite of this understanding Unterhalter proposed that there is "...rich potential for cross-disciplinary work, where a depth of social analysis can complement and provide new contexts to explore questions posed by the capability approach" (p.668). In addition she pointed to

possibilities related to considering what scope the capability approach might provide for evaluating education differently beyond the debate about input and output measures and thereby allow for "...a new perspective for addressing distributional issues and concerns with educational equality"(Unterhalter, p.668).

It is indeed possible that Unterhalter would agree that many of her concerns have been addressed in Sen's later work, for example in *Identity and Violence* (2006). Within this material, Sen offered a penetrating and nuanced investigation into multi-culturism and stated that "if cultural issues are taken into account, among others, in a fuller accounting of societal change, they can greatly help to broaden our understanding of the world" (p.108). Furthermore, he implied that the fuller accounting of social change will be achieved by ensuring "the two-way relationship between education and culture, just as education influences culture, so can antecedent culture have an effect on educational policies" (p.108). Through the power of narrative he illustrated, with moving life stories, including his own, how education plays a vital role in forming "the values, ethics and sense of belonging that shape our conception of the global world" (p. 185). Throughout this work, Sen held the focus on equality, global poverty and global fairness and reminded us, as does the work of the Equality Studies Centre, examined earlier, that the "...nature of market outcomes are massively influenced by public policies in education and literacy...in each of these fields there are things to be done through public action that can radically alter the outcome of local and global economic relations" (Sen, 2006, p.138).

Inequality in education can be seen as a political issue, in particular through the reproduction and resistance debate (see for example Fagan, 1995). Theorists interested in linking education to politics turned to Marxism as the main critical theory, giving rise to the argument that the forces of (re)production within a capitalist society determine the school failure of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in order to maintain the status quo for the dominant capitalist class. Following on from a critique of the determination of the reproduction model, the late 1970s saw the emergence of a Marxist interpretation of early school leaving, namely the *resistance perspective* (Fagan). While accepting the basic merits of the reproduction perspective, resistance theory focused more on the pro-active participation of dropping out of school by the working class as a symbol of revolt against perceived suppression. This perspective explains educational failure among working-class children as oppositional behaviour and politically-based rather than deviant (Fagan). Thus, rejection of school authority by working class children was seen as working class resistance to what they recognised as the inherent inequalities in the educational system favouring middle-class aims and values.

Other perspectives began to widen the Marxist narrative on educational discourse and a new critical focus on gender and race strengthened the debate on educational inequality. Fagan (1995), in her research into Irish school drop-outs, attempted to progress the political debate and practice through exploring the potential of radical democratic politics to empower early school leavers. She used insights gleaned from the progressive theoretical paradigms of the late 1980s and 1990s such as post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, post-colonialism, post-Marxism and

critical cultural studies to go beyond a critique of the forces of social and economic control. Fagan primarily situated herself within cultural politics as a means of holding transformative possibilities to empowering early school leavers while simultaneously drawing from and contributing to the broader politics of radical democracy. In my view Fagan's thesis holds a key to the way forward to breaking down the intractable stubbornness of educational inequality, especially as she views this inequality as a lived experience.

This approach is also supported by Gilligan's (2005) call for the adoption of some prerequisites for transformational change in an unequal world. She argues for the need to take on board the voices of those living with the reality of poverty and to learn from the experience of those whose needs are not being met by the current education system. Gilligan (2005, p.244) argued for an "ethical imagination" to fuel "transformative action" and identified the role of the imagination in bridging the gap between theory and practice, between the present reality and the imagined future.

Educational Disadvantage, Social Exclusion and Poverty

The frame of reference applied here is based on the definition of "educational disadvantage" in the Education Act 1998 (Section 32: 9 [Government of Ireland, 1998]): "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools". Educational disadvantage refers to a situation whereby individuals in society derive less benefit from the education system than their peers. In Ireland it is manifested in many ways, most notably in low levels of participation and achievement in the

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formal education system as 15.6% of 18-24 year olds had left school without a formal qualification in 2006 (Central Statistics Office, 2007). According to Smyth and McCoy (2009, p.2), "education is highly predictive of individual life-chances in Ireland and a Leaving Certificate qualification has become the 'minimum' to secure access to further education/training and high quality employment, among other outcomes".

Educational disadvantage is closely linked to poverty. A substantial volume of research indicates that individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to underachieve in the education system than their peers from higher income backgrounds (Archer & Weir, 2005; Boldt & Devine, 1998; Eivers, Sheil & Shortt, 2004; Kelleghan, Weir, ó hUallacháin & Morgan, 1995; National Economic and Social Forum [NESF], 2002; Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs [OMCYA], 2010; Smyth, 1999; Smyth & Hannon, 2000). According to the CPA (2003), educational disadvantage is also considered to be a factor that perpetuates intergenerational poverty. This factor is an important one to note when providing a rationale for studying school absenteeism.

According to Downes and Gilligan (2007), "few if any educationalists would contest the view that poverty is the foundation and key issue that must be addressed if we are to end educational disadvantage in Ireland today" (p.xiv). Much

interdisciplinary research work has been undertaken with a focus on family poverty and links with educational disadvantage (Archer, 2001; Daly & Leonard, 2002; DES[4], 2005a; Smyth & McCoy, 2009; SVP, 2002). According to the DES (2005a, p.65), "It is clear that educational attainment is one of the most significant factors in helping people to escape inter-generational poverty". Educational disadvantage is most comprehensively understood as the inability to derive an equal benefit from education (as a result of social, economic, cultural, environmental, school and system factors), which results in disadvantage, inside and outside the formal educational system, in the form of underachievement within the school system, low literacy levels, early school leaving, and exclusion from secure, well-paid employment, adequate housing, services and lifelong learning.

A 2006 study in Blanchardstown[5], which focused on four primary schools, identified food poverty as a serious issue with "approximately 18% of the 6th class pupils attending school on a given day across the four schools stated that they were either often, very often or every day too hungry to do their work in school" (Downes, Maunsel & Ivers, p.77). The authors argued for services and schools to intervene in a

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[4] Until 2010 the Department was known as the Department of Education and Science and subsequently known as Department of Education and Skills or DES.
[5] Blanchardstown is a large suburban district in Dublin. The schools involved in this study are those within the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning Investment and Development Programme) areas of Blanchardstown. RAPID targeted urban centres nationally with greatest concentration of disadvantage for priority funding under the National Development Plan. The four RAPID areas within Blanchardstown are Corduff, Mountview, Blakestown and Mulhuddart.

consistent fashion to deal with the problem of poverty and its effects on education. Interestingly for this research they linked the provision of breakfast clubs in the relevant schools to the increase in school attendance in their study.

Critics of the failure of Irish society to address the intractable nature of educational disadvantage usually linked this back to the need for a fundamental shift in how we operated our systems. This is the approach recommended by egalitarian commentators and academics and can be summed up by a statement by O' Céinnide at a conference on *Welfare and Poverty* when he advocated that "we need to widen our focus, not concentrating solely on 'the poor' or 'the excluded' but on the incomes and welfare of, and relations between, all levels in society" (O'Céinnide, 2007, p.2). There have been many attempts to redress the fact that young people in schools designated as disadvantaged and from poorer backgrounds have a greater risk of significant reading difficulties, higher absenteeism and leave school earlier and with fewer qualifications, but unfortunately as Tormey (2007, p.1) pointed out at the aforementioned conference on *Welfare and Poverty*: "It is arguable that the association between poverty or social class and educational outcomes remains as much a feature of the Irish educational landscape as ever".

Research carried out by Kellaghan et al. (1995) on educational disadvantage in Ireland is probably the key source of literature in this area. Based on an understanding of educational disadvantage as a culmination of both in-school and out-of-school experiences, Kellaghan et al. used indicators of low educational achievement (i.e. scores from a 5th class reading test) and poverty (i.e. possession of a family medical card) to estimate that 16% of the school-going population can be

regarded as educationally disadvantaged. However, with the exception of the study

of Kellaghan et al. (1995), the focus (until relatively recently) on early school leaving

meant that there is very little research available that provided a comprehensive

picture of the extent of educational disadvantage in Ireland, using the broader

understanding of the concept. A number of individual studies provide different,

individual sets of data, which collectively contributed vital information on the extent

and location of educational disadvantage in Ireland (McCoy at al., 2007). The rates

of early school leaving have remained constant since the mid-1990s (Mc Coy, Kelly

& Watson, 2007; McCoy & Williams, 2000), and early school leaving is clearly still

a serious issue. Klasen (2000) pointed out that education systems on their own

cannot tackle disadvantage and social exclusion and that substantial progress in other

areas such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, unemployment, access to public

and social services, and the geographical concentrations of economic and social

disadvantage also have to be made for educational systems to address the problems

they are capable of addressing. Many authors have called for a shift to a rights-based

analysis and to the language of equality and away from the language of disadvantage

(Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2005; Zappone, 2002).

<center>Understandings of Absenteeism</center>

The focus on early school leaving and educational disadvantage in the 1990s

provided the backdrop for a refocusing on the retention of students at schools and the

revival of interest in ensuring that all children get access to the education system.

The study of absenteeism begins with the exploration of the concept of mandatory or

compulsory schooling. A brief historical account of the development of the concept

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of compulsory school attendance in Ireland is provided, by way of background. This will be enhanced further in the policy review chapter through the presentation of a chronological record of legislation related to school attendance in Ireland.

Compulsory education and schooling has generated much discussion and sociological exploration over the centuries, with views ranging from it being good to it being an unnecessary imposition. This interrogation has been influenced by the position taken of the view of the world and on the relationship between the state and family authority. This is very true particularly in Ireland which enshrined the special position of the family in the Irish Constitution in 1937. Kilkelly (2010) made the distinction between rights of the family and those of children when she explained that it is "of particular importance that the terms of Article 42 of the Irish Constitution are parent rather than child focused reflecting the fact that in Irish law, education concerns the relationship between the state and the family, rather than [the state and] the child" (p.10). The constitutional position of the rights of the child to education will be discussed further in the next chapter.

According to Fahey (1992), as the relatively young Irish state developed its own systems, this also resulted in the growth of interventionist polices. One example of this is the adoption of the UK's compulsory schooling policies. Compulsion implies having to do something and the imposition of a rule or law. This compulsion reflected liberal thinking which viewed schooling as the right way to impose something good on the population at large (Fahey). In contrast to these views theorists such as Tyack (1976) argued that schooling was an example of the dominant class ensuring that their status is maintained and unchallenged.

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More recently the study of school non-attendance in one large English city has prompted researchers such as Dwyfor Davies and Lee (2006) to note that the effect of compulsory schooling for almost all young people is to pathologise school non-attendance. According to Dwyfor Davies and Lee students who do not attend school are necessarily a problem for schools, authorities and the political community but non-attendance, of itself, is not necessarily a problem for the student. Small-scale research undertaken by these authors suggests that, for some students, self-withdrawal is a solution to a problem (Dwyfor Davies & Lee, 2006). In an effort to aid understanding, while not dismissing the dilemmas of school authorities, Dwyfor Davies and Lee stood back from the assumption that non-attendance is a problem and suggested that the term self-withdrawal is less prejudicial and this maybe an accurate descriptor in some cases. Their paper positioned pupil and parent voices at the heart of the ongoing debate regarding the nature of schooling for children and young people who are in the process of becoming alienated from a self-proclaimed inclusive education system (Dwyfor Davies & Lee, 2006).

There is merit in highlighting the consequence of the compulsory nature of school attendance and Dwyfor Davies and Lee's recommendation for the adoption of the concept of self-withdrawal is welcomed as it has potential to shift the power and responsibility dynamics and could lead to the adoption of alterative solutions. These researchers suggested that "compulsion is of limited use in analysing the issues surrounding self-withdrawal" (Dwyfor Davies & Lee, 2006, p.208) and that it may be more useful to explore what is to be gained from school attendance through the examination of both the providers' and the students' perspectives. They stress that

consent is required to operate any system successfully and that implies understanding

the benefit from both sides and a breakdown of this contractual type of relationship

often leads to unpredictable behaviour such as self-withdrawal. I will elaborate on

this in the discussion chapter as there is an opportunity to explore this argument

while engaging with the findings of this study. It is worth noting the focus of Dwyer

Davies and Lee's research was on post primary pupils. However, they do reference

students' memory of their experiences at primary level which is the reason for

including their views in this review. In addition to the studies mentioned above, there

is a body of international research literature on poor school attendance and its impact

on student outcomes, some of which is reviewed to offer a working definition of

absenteeism.

Towards a Working Definition of Absenteeism

The study of absenteeism is particularly complex as there is a lack of easily

understood terms due, in part, to the fact that there is not an accepted consensus

regarding the conceptualisation of the term school absenteeism or what Kearney

(2007) refers to as school refusal behaviour. According to Atkinson, Quarrington,

and Cyr (1985), most studies on school absenteeism contain methodological artefacts

that mask the significance of the complexity inherent in this phenomenon. Many

terms, such as school refusal, non-attendance, absenteeism and truancy are used as

umbrella terms that cover many hypothesised subtypes of youths displaying

problematic absenteeism (Kearney). It is clear from the literature and from an

analysis of policy responses that the lack of clear definitions has not prevented a

myriad of developments designed to tackle this phenomenon. However, the lack of

clarity and consensus may be the reason why Kearney (2007) claimed that many

studies in this area are difficult to compare.

In my review of the literature I was struck by the prevalence of the labelling of

truancy, even in work by Irish-based authors (Fahey, 1992; McCoy et al., 2007). This

is the case in spite of the absence of a shared understanding of this term and of its

less frequent application in some literature, especially in relation to primary level

education. I suspect this prevalence is due to practical concerns of academic writers

making links with international literature. However, this study will only refer to

truancy when quoting relevant studies and will usually apply school absenteeism as

the working term when referring to pupils who miss school at primary level.

International Knowledge Informing our Understanding of Absenteeism

It is difficult to place Ireland in an international context in terms of the

prevalence of attendance problems and levels of attendance and nonattendance as

countries collect information on different measures of attendance and different

criteria are employed to assess attendance levels (McCoy et al., 2007). The extent of

absence from school can differ considerably as it can range from the occasional

skipping of classes (often referred to as truancy) to absenteeism that may last for

several weeks (Atkinson, Halsey, Wilkin, & Kinder, 2000).

As stated above, much attention is given in the literature to truancy and it has

been defined by Stroll (1990, cited in Darmody et al., 2007, p.2) as 'absence from

school for no legitimate reason'. However, as noted by the Office for Standards in

Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2001), 'truancy is not

synonymous with unauthorised absence'. This is because schools may not authorise

an absence that parents deem acceptable. Parentally-condoned absence is often perceived by teachers of primary school children as a reason for non-attendance (Reid, 2006). Truancy, as described in the literature, refers not just to skipping school because of rebellion, boredom or lack of interest in lessons, although these can be reasons for playing truant. In the majority of persistent cases, the causes are complex (Reid, 2006). Some of the literature also refers to the despondent or 'present but absent' student as it cannot be assumed that benefit will always follow being in attendance (Collins, 1998).

It is not surprising that there has been a variety of different sub-classifications used in Ireland and in other countries. Some of the developments that have taken place internationally have led to the formulation of specific classifications of the various forms of absenteeism. For example, in Scotland the use of concepts of authorised and unauthorised absenteeism is common, while in Northern Ireland and the UK the categories are described as explained and unexplained absenteeism. In Ireland there does not appear to be exact comparable terms, however, in practice, schools use a distinction between parentally-explained and unexplained absence, although no such distinction appears in official records.

Another approach to the analysis of absenteeism is to identify the various perspectives adopted by researchers exploring this phenomenon. Reviewing some of the historical literature e.g. Hersov and Berg (1980), it is clear that various professionals bring their own perspective to bear on this issue. These perspectives include a child developmental approach, a psychological focus, a psychiatric disorder focus and motivational deficit focus. The psychological focus emphasises students'

sense of belonging or attachment to school, which has to do with feelings of being accepted and valued by their peers, and by others at their school. Another aspect of the psychological focus concerned whether or not students value school success and believe that education will benefit them personally and economically (Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001).

These understandings link strongly with a study conducted in Ireland in which the authors refer to 'subjective factors' (McCoy et al., 2007). Some clarity may be found through distinguishing the causes and consequences of poor school attendance. However, it is often not possible to classify the related factors definitively. While the nature and extent of school absence differ, it is also important to note that lack of participation in education is caused by multiple, often interrelated factors (Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2007). In the absence of clear definitions and an agreed understanding of this concept most of the literature highlights two main aspects: the perceived causes and the perceived consequences.

Causes of School Absenteeism

Previous international research has identified a variety of causes of persistent absenteeism from school. As stated by Darmody et al. (2007), students who miss school do not constitute a homogenous group which in turn implies that the causes of school absenteeism are multidimensional. In many cases the causes are also contested between parents/students and the school staff with the school staff often citing the cause as the home background of the student and the parents and students locating the cause in the school (Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson & Kirk, 2003). However, in the literature, the most commonly causes were linked to in-school

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factors such as the quality of teaching, teacher-pupil relations and pastoral care; a school's ethos, leadership and management style; the extent of bullying; and out-of-school and after-school facilities and provision (Atkinson et al., 2000; Reid, 1999, 2002).

In Downes (2004), the findings from child-centred research in the Dublin suburb of Ballyfermot highlighted that pupils across a range of primary schools perceived bullying to be a major problem and frequently raised this issue in questionnaires, even when not directly asked about bullying itself. In addition a notable minority of pupils drew an explicit link "between being bullied and not attending school" (Downes, 2004, p.11). More evidence of the existence of bullying in schools was seen in another large Dublin suburb, Tallaght, where it was reported that 33% of children had been bullied at school, with 8% of these being bullied several times a week during the previous term (Childhood Development Initiative, 2004).

Other school-based causes, such as the attitude of teachers, school principals, year heads, and other professionals (e.g. Education Welfare Officers) to the management of attendance within schools, was also explored in research (Reid, 2004, 2005). The nature of interaction with peers and teachers, the content and delivery of the curriculum and its relevance, discipline issues, boredom with school, and the academic ethos of the school and teachers expectations were also highlighted (Smyth, 1999; Smyth, McCoy & Darmody, 2004). An Ofsted study in the UK (2001) found that, in some schools, poor attendance occurs disproportionately among students who were weak readers, indicating a link between academic difficulties and

absence. Difficulty in keeping up with school work and learning difficulties experienced by students are also highlighted in other studies as possible causes of absence (Malcolm et al., 2003). However, according to Reid (2006), there were wide variations in attendance rates between schools, even schools located in similar catchment areas and homogeneous places. Reid further argued that "while social class and pupil intake factors may on occasion account for some of these differences, there are undoubtedly a range of within-school factors which are also highly significant" (p.42).

In searching for causal factors, a feature that emerges is that whilst most parents think it's important that children attend school regularly, parents perceived the main cause of non-attendance to be bullying, problems with teachers and peer pressure (Malcolm et al., 2003). These researchers pointed out that local education authorities and teachers, on the other hand, believed that parental attitudes and home environments were more influential. The out-of- school aspect include a wide range of factors related to the community environment and family economic circumstances and the child's personality, including lack of self-esteem, poor self-concept, social skills, confidence, and psychological problems (Dwyfor Davies & Lee, 2006; Kinder, Wakefield & Wilkin, 1996; Malcolm et al., 2003; Reid, 1982). In addition, some studies have highlighted gender and age as important factors, for example the Social Exclusion Unit (1998) in the UK and Wagner, Dunkake and Weiss (2004). The latter found that male students, in Germany, were generally more likely than female students to miss school regularly.

According to Willms' (2003), longitudinal research on child development suggested that there is a core set of risk factors including poverty, poor temperament, cognitive problems, learning disabilities and physical and mental disabilities that were evident in many children when they entered school. Children who display behaviour problems or learning difficulties during the early years of schooling were *vulnerable*, in the sense that, without concerted and prolonged intervention, their chances of succeeding at school or leading healthy and productive lives were diminished. He linked this to the struggle many children had with reading (Rowe & Rowe, 1992), and explained that their problems worsen when mathematics and other school subjects placed greater demands on reading skills. Willms stated that by the middle school grades (5 to 7), many of these children displayed a low commitment to educational activities, a disaffection towards school, poor social bonding, and poor peer relations. These characteristics continued into the post primary school years, which placed these children at a very high risk of conduct disorders, low achievement, and early school withdrawal and other consequences of poor school attendance.

Consequences of School Absenteeism

Previous research indicated that, in general, school absence can be associated with early school leaving, academic underperformance and more restricted opportunities in terms of further education, training and the labour market (Malcolm, Thorpe & Lowden, 1996). Invariably, persistent absence from school resulted in limited life-chances and quality of life for the young person involved (Farrington, 1980; Wagner et al., 2004). There is much research evidence that early school

leaving and poor educational attainment was strongly linked with long-term unemployment (McCoy & Smyth, 2004). Moreover, early school leaving and persistent absenteeism can also lead to antisocial behaviour (Malcolm et al., 2003; Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2004; Robins & Radcliffe, 1980), and a possible association between truancy and crime has also been noted (Department for Education, Skills & Home Office, 1999, 2001). Greater involvement in delinquency was significantly associated with school non-attendance.

While not necessarily a direct cause, non-attendance is an important signal of difficulties among young people and this group had more negative post-school outcomes in terms of access to higher education and employment. It appears, therefore, that, while in some cases, operating as a form of resistance to school culture, non-attendance served to reproduce social class inequalities in educational and labour market outcomes (Darmody et al., 2007).

The Nature of Absenteeism in Ireland

Cognisant of the dearth of studies that focus specifically on school absenteeism the NEWB commissioned an investigation into the causal factors in relation to absenteeism in Ireland. This review, already referenced in this chapter, classified these aforementioned causes that pertain to individual students into objective and subjective characteristics (McCoy et al., 2007). The objective characteristics included the backgrounds of students with poor attendance, focusing on social class, parental education and ethnicity along with a spotlight on the regional variation in the prevalence of poor attendance. The review was based on re-analysis of data collected for earlier studies undertaken in the Economic and Social Research Institute

(ESRJ) and the national data collected by the NEWB (Weir, 2004). McCoy et al. (2007) pointed out that even though these data, while not focusing explicitly on attendance: "do provide valuable insights into the individual and school factors influencing attendance in post-primary schools" (p.2). Even though the information gleaned by McCoy et al. relates directly to the post-primary school sector, it does assist in our overall understanding of absenteeism in Ireland.

Coinciding with the international research, the findings indicate that young male students are somewhat more likely to skip school than young female students as are students who are older than average. It also substantiates the association between attendance and family background characteristics: students from professional families and/or those whose parents have third-level qualifications tend to have better attendance records and are less likely to skip classes. While differences in attendance rates by national origin were not statistically significant, up to this period, non-attendance patterns show a particularly strong association with membership of the Traveller Community. In addition, the study identified some regional differences; the incidence of serious poor attendance was higher in the Border counties, Dublin and South-Eastern areas (McCoy et al., 2007).

The report provided a classification of subjective characteristics which drew from three data sources[6] to investigate some of the attitudes that characterised pupils with poor attendance and the focus remained on post primary pupils. While acknowledging that the relationship between pupil attitudes and attendance levels was not necessarily a causal relationship, the report particularly focused on the pupil experience of school life, looking at their attitudes to school, teachers, their self-rating as pupils and their interactions with peers. In addition to these factors, the relationship between part-time working and poor attendance was also explored (McCoy et al., 2007).

The authors acknowledged that it is unsurprising that pupils with poor attendance rates generally reported negative attitudes to school and teachers. They proposed that by studying these subjective characteristics of students we may obtain an insight into how poor attendees view their school experience. The negative nature of the relationship these pupils had with their school life was highlighted with poor attendees not only disliking school but they were significantly less likely to think school life was happy for them and viewed it as unfriendly (McCoy et al., 2007). They were more likely to think their teachers did not care for them and that the school rules were unfair. It is also unsurprising that poor attendees had lower academic performance and did not have confidence in their academic ability (less

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[6] The Schools' Database of 1994, the School Leavers' Survey of 2002 and the Junior Cycle Longitudinal Study 2004.

than 66% of those with poor attendance thought their school work was worth doing).

The authors concluded that pupils' withdrawal from school appeared to reflect

disaffection with school life, a proposition that is referred to in international literature

as disengagement, a subject highlighted particularly by Willms (2003).

An Integrated Response to School Attendance

Over the past 15 to 20 years, there has been growing support for the idea that

problems of educational disadvantage, including poor school attendance, required an

integrated response (Cullen, 2000; Zappone, 2001, 2002). Support for integrated

responses has taken many forms since the 1980s and the development of some of

these will be referred to in the next (policy) chapter. However, one of the most

critical examples of the development of a mechanism to instigate a new practice of

integration of services deserves a mention here as it relates directly to school

attendance. This is the establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board

(NEWB) in 2002, with the primary aim of implementing the Education (Welfare)

Act (Government of Ireland, 2000). This service was established to ebb the tide of

educational disadvantage through ensuring that "….every child's right to an

education is realised" (Downes & Gilligan, 2007). This development resulted from a

growing consensus that school absenteeism deserved particular attention if Ireland

was intending to move beyond educational disadvantage.

According to the NEWB (2009) one of the challenges faced by the Board was

to make optimum use of the resources allocated and to develop and deliver quality

services to children, families and schools. Within this remit the Board undertook to

develop a model of service that was collaborative and built on the work of others.

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One of the principles underpinning this approach was that the model would be respectful of families and their circumstances and that legal sanctions (as stated in the Act) was used as a last resort to achieve positive change for the child. Having reviewed how the service was operating since 2002 the Board decided to pilot a new integrated model of service, based on its previous experience. The objectives were twofold: to maintain a quality professional supervision policy to support staff in their work and to ensure that the work prioritised a focus on standards and outcomes. According to the evaluation report of the pilot project, "the work of the organisation's supervision policy identified the need to describe and standardise educational welfare practice and to focus on the family's journey from point of first direct contact with the service until case closure" (NEWB, 2009, p.2).

The pilot project involved the establishment of guidelines to direct the work. These were tested and externally evaluated over a six month period. The participants for the Pilot Project included 17 Educational Welfare Staff and 79 schools in six pilot geographical areas. Relevant School Principals and the Education Support Services[7] including the Home School Community Liaison Coordinators, School Completion Coordinators and Visiting Teachers for Travellers along with the NEWB teams were all involved in the project. According to NEWB (2009, p. 3), the model selected for

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[7] This project used the term Education Support Services to refer to the Home School Community Liaison Programme, the School Completion Programme and the Visiting Teachers for Travellers Scheme. It is worth noting that these programmes are also referred to as the School Support Programme (SSP) under DEIS as they were integrated with other schemes within DEIS (DES, 2005a).

testing "is consistent with the common features of other national and international models of child and family practice with a clear emphasis on assessment, planning, and engagement of clients in meetings targets and resolving issues". The evaluation aimed to "outline[s] the nature of the new way of working with vulnerable children and families in collaboration with schools and other colleagues in education support services in relation to school attendance and placement matters" (NEWB, 2009, p. 2). The report claimed that this learning process represented "a significant shift in paradigm from focusing solely on raw attendance data" and that "the model recognises the role of schools in early intervention" (NEWB, p.2).

The results of the evaluation indicated that the impact of the new way of working with children, families and schools was positive, resulting in strong support for its continued use and development. The difference in perspectives of the participants, outlined in the findings, is worth noting as it gets to the essence of why integrated work can be so difficult. The aspect of the new approach most strongly favoured by the School Principals was the structured interagency case planning. They welcomed the new focus on collaborative working, with 68% of Principals seeing this as an improvement on current practice. However, the time required for interagency meetings and completing referral forms caused them concern. Principals also felt that, even with the new approach, EWOs would not be able to provide inputs to all the children and families who need this level of intervention. The aspect of the approach about which they had most reservations was the emphasis on children's participation and ensuring that this is done in an age appropriate manner. These concerns acknowledged the benefits of the new focus of listening directly to

children; however, they also expressed concern about the suitability of this more participative approach for younger children with attendance concerns.

The aspect of the new approach most strongly favoured among the Education Support Services was the focus on collaborative working with "97% seeing this as an improvement on current practice" (NEWB, 2009, p. 32). Findings among these services also indicated very high levels of approval for case planning (87%), listening to children (79%) and attendance target setting (77%). However, they had reservations about the use of the referral form, mainly citing concerns about how the completion of the form would be managed at school level. It appears that these concerns were related to clarity of roles and responsibilities in relation to form filling and signing. However, 77% of Education Support Services stated that the new referral process improved NEWB's service to the children with the greatest attendance difficulties.

Participants in the pilot also included parents and children and their response in the evaluation was deemed positive, particularly "to being part of the planning group and contributing to finding solutions to the attendance problems. They expressed satisfaction with the way they were listened to and that their experience was valued" (NEWB, 2009, p.32). Arising from the successful outcomes of the evaluation the NEWB plan to extend the model to other areas to "broaden the experience and to advance our understanding of what works in relation to attendance and the achievement of good service outcomes for children and families" (NEWB, 2009, p.2). As mentioned in the next chapter, this learning project took place prior to policy announcement by the Department of Education and Science (May 2009) to extend

the remit of the NEWB to include responsibility for the Home School Community

Liaison Scheme (HSCL), the School Completion Programme (SCP), and the Visiting

Teacher Service for Travellers (VTST).

The learning from this example provides a good starting point for the work that

is now getting under way on developing a more integrated response to school

attendance, retention and participation. This can also be augmented by learning from

a number of early intervention and prevention initiatives that are being rolled out

currently in disadvantaged communities (PEIP)[8]. These initiatives include rigorous

evaluations of in and out-of-school elements with the objective of identifying what

works for children and include, in particular, a focus on support to parents from birth

and the pre-school sector (OMCYA, 2008). In addition, another study which focused

on an integrated response to tackling early school leaving in an inner city

disadvantaged community provided a model of early intervention and integration of

health and education services and argued for a targeted, strategic vision to address

serious disadvantage (Downes & Maunsell, 2007). These examples are cited here as

an indication of growing emphasis in practice to initiate "an integrated, joined up

strategy with new services and key actors willing to collaborate [and] requires a

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[8] The Prevention and Early Intervention Programme for children (PEIP) was established by the
OMCYA and The Atlantic Philanthropies in February 2007 to support and promote better outcomes
for children in disadvantaged areas through innovation, effective planning, integration and delivery of
services. The PEIP(C) was a five year committed fund of €36 million (€18 million from Government
and €18 million from The Atlantic Philanthropies).

change of systems at local level with an intention to fit joined-up efforts and change systems at national level" (Zappone, 2007, p.21). The focus on integrated services led researchers to explore how policies are implemented through the development of evidence-based practice. Mention of this here gives the opportunity to connect back with learning from studies of inequality of education and to take on board the need for change at the systemic level.

Implementation of Integrated Services

Implementation science refers to the identification of ways to "transmit innovative programs and practices to mental health, social services, juvenile justice, education, early childhood education, employment services, and substance abuse prevention and treatment"(Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman & Wallace, 2005, p.vi). Fixsen et al. espoused the role of systematic implementation in any attempt to utilise evidence-based programmes or other products of science to improve lives of children and families. They refer to evidence-based practices as being skills, techniques and strategies that can be used by a service provider or practitioner (Fixsen et al., p.26). These practices propose to offer options of service delivery to ensure desirable results and provide a way to transform the conceptual objectives of interventions into effective practice with positive outcomes. The review of implementation science carried out by Fixsen et al. provides insight into system change needed at organisational levels and could provide a framework for change management for the education sector. They advocate a closer link for practitioners (such as teachers) with research findings to ensure that the goal of implementation is accomplished to the highest quality standards possible (Fixsen et al., p. 28).

The link between change management and training of professionals and ongoing continual professional development could offer an interesting theoretical base upon which to shift practices in response to educational disadvantage as outlined by advocates of implementation science. Lodge and Lynch (2004) recommended awareness raising for all education partners in relation to equality legislation so that everyone involved is aware of their rights and responsibilities. These authors stated that, "to bring about real change, educational institutions should devise equality action plans (not just write policies) with definite targets, measurable objectives and specific timescales as well as having clear reporting mechanisms and implementation strategies" (Lodge & Lynch, p.106). They recommended specific in-service training for teachers and school management in relation to equality legislation and implementation.

A similar gap in skills was recognised by Downes, Maunsel & Ivers (2006), in relation to creating an environment conducive to collaborative work between schools and other support services. In their study they were concerned that:

> A number of service providers refer to a lack of equality in the communicative relation between their service and the schools, referring for example to 'communication barriers', the need to be 'working with not for the teachers', 'no parity of esteem', 'two separate cultures essentially'. Processes will need to be established to facilitate genuine collaboration between services and schools for this Psychological Support Service [to work successfully]. (Downes et al., 2006, p.83)

The literature on implementation of policies that strive to improve outcomes for children through ensuring greater equality for all espouse the development of a shared understanding of the desired objectives and call for systemic change. Fixsen et al. (2005, p. 68) pointed out that similar core implementation components seem to apply equally well to a broad range of programmes and practices across a variety of domains. It is my view that the latter contention could provide a key for influencing social and economic policy reform in a country such as Ireland. This broader reform could focus on the implementation of change at system levels including in the education system.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a framework, through an investigation in the literature, of the key concepts underpinning the substantive subject of this thesis. The intention of this approach is to locate the issue of school absenteeism in the discourse about inequality of education and educational disadvantage. Using an interdisciplinary approach drawing on the literature of sociology and philosophy, this review provides the foundation from which to investigate the legislation, policy formation and implementation relevant to school absenteeism in the next chapter. Both of these chapters provide the broad landscape for the study and through the identification of key developments they afford the opportunity for dialogue interwoven with the research data (discussion chapter 6).

The main elements, outlined here, that will assist the discourse with the study's findings include (a) the radical equality theory of egalitarianism (Baker, 2005; Baker et al., 2009) and how it links to the social choice theory (Sen, 1979,

1999, 2006); (b) production and resistance theories (Fagan, 1995) as related to early

school leaving and disengagement in school and (c) the relative and relational nature

of the concept of disadvantage and absenteeism (CPA, 2003), including the concept

of consent. The final overarching concept is that of implementation of system change

and the components of well-defined polices that are required to truly address the gaps

between aspirations and service delivery such as is needed to lessen inequality in the

current Irish education system.

CHAPTER 3: LEGISLATION and POLICY REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline legislative and policy developments in relation to school attendance in Ireland. This is framed by the general political, social and cultural context within which the current education system exists. Education legislation and policy initiatives with direct implications for school attendance at primary level will be the main focus of the review. The objective of this chapter is to review the linkages in Irish educational policy with the broad themes of equality, inequality of education and educational disadvantage and identify the implications for primary school attendance. I aim to select some of the main tendencies, patterns, key moments and significant developments in education reform that relate to the review of the concepts and understanding as outlined previously.

Understandings of Policy Formation and Implementation

Policy formation merits detailed and regular analysis and debate as it is through the application and implementation of policy that systems are put in place by which society functions equitably and efficiently. Broadly speaking when people refer to policy makers they are referring to Government and to the public service. The past two decades have witnessed enormous change in the context of governance and

policy making in Ireland. By mid 1990s Ireland had entered a time of economic prosperity referred to as the *Celtic Tiger*[9] which lasted beyond the mid 2000s. The speed of change that transformed a relatively poor country on the periphery of Europe to a country held as an example of economic success and the subsequent fairly sudden reversal of this trend has meant that Irish governance structures have witnessed profound uncertainty and change. The dramatic downturn in the economy resulting in a spectacular reversal of the economic story by 2008 led to a Gross Domestic Product (GDP[10]) contraction of 14% and expected unemployment levels at 14% by 2010 (ESRI, 2009). According to the NESC (2010, p.98), "excess bank borrowing and pro-cyclical fiscal policy created unsustainable growth between 2000 and 2007 and made Ireland especially vulnerable to the global crisis which hit in 2008". In 2011, the challenges for the Irish government and other policy makers are profound and corrective measures to reduce both current and capital exchequer expenditure are now inescapable.

During the early 2000s there was growing awareness that economic growth was not enough to ensure the kind of progress that was being sought. There was an emphasis on addressing both economic and social development through the design of carefully crafted policy, originally separately and then in a more integrated way

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[9] Celtic Tiger is a term used to describe the economy of Ireland during a period of rapid economic growth between 1995–2007.
[10] GDP is the central aggregate of National Accounts. It represents the total value added (output) in the production of goods and services in the country.

(NESF, 2009). As referred to at the conclusion of the literature review there was a shifting of emphasis from the design of policy to its implementation and the impending complexities. However, the results were often judged as incomplete and patchy, undesirable and unintended challenges of policy implementation (NESF, 2009). As early as 1994, Coolahan highlighted that as difficult it is to formulate policy it is even more difficult to implement it as its success depends on many variables. According to Stone (2002), policy making is a messy and untidy business and has several components from design to implementation. It is complicated by the fact that those responsible, for the most part, for its creation are also responsible for overseeing it, funding it and its implementation.

In simple terms, public policy is about the decision making required to guide public spending in an effective and efficient way. According to Majone and Wildavsky (1978), policy is best depicted by a continuum which starts with ideas and ends with action which can be altered and changed through its interpretation and context. There is a wide range of ways of looking at policy business but there are some things that are given and not up for dispute. There can be no doubt that all new policies have to come after existing ones and it is never possible to operate from a clean slate (Cohen & Spillane, 1992).

During the past few years, in Ireland, there has been much debate about how best to endure the current economic downturn while also ensuring sustainable future growth. The concern for making relevant policy decisions and choices resulted in a renewed focus on policy implementation and integration of services by the Irish government. McCarthy (2005) focused on the need for system change to respond to

the challenge of effective policy-making particularly in the difficult areas of policy

relating to social exclusion. McCarthy further argued that as in all policy making

there can be both intended and unintended outcomes and the way to avert possible

'*perverse consequences'* of public policy is to adopt a more joined-up approach to

such complex social problems.

Policy Implementation and Reform

This debate has led to a focus on the need for political and social reform and

systems change which is worth mentioning in the context of this thesis. There has

been a renewed focus on policy implementation as it has been named as the area of

deficit by many analysts (Lieberman, 1998; NESC, 2005; NESF, 2009; Organisation

of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2008). At a macro level there

has been recognition of the positives of the last two decades with a renewed

emphasis on strengthening the innovation and learning that has taken place across

many sectors (National Economic and Social Development Office [NESDO], (2009).

A study, *FuturesIreland* (NESDO, 2009), built on a series of future scoping (policy

informing) exercises and aimed at finding ways to enhance Ireland as a learning

society. It focused on the interaction between wealth creation, society and public

governance and described this approach as being "based on the belief that, in many

respects, the future is here already in the practices and patterns of those actors most

attuned to emerging possibilities" (NESDO, p.18). The emerging focus on the

interaction between governance structures, market forces and society resulted in

proposals for *cross-fertilization* between these three spheres and called for "profound

change to our organisational systems, particularly our systems of control and accountability in the public sector" (p.57).

In identifying capabilities at three levels (institutional, inter-personal and intra-personal) *FuturesIreland* (FI) called for an alignment between these three levels to ensure clear roles, commitments and accountability. It cited present failure to ensure that innovation exists within a context that encourages a duty to system review and accountability. Finally it concluded that the "evidence collected in the project revealed a disjuncture between a widespread disposition to be flexible and to learn from experience, on the one hand, and the near despair about the limits of learning in our collective endeavours [on the other hand]" (NESDO, p.59). This latter statement and the aforementioned discussion are provided here by way of background to the current focus on the challenges that exist for policy implementation and the demand for change within the Irish governance systems including the education system.

Irish Education Policy Context

Many policy analysts and policy makers viewed the broader education system as being at the centre of the economic and social progress that took place prior to the mid 2000s (DES, 2004; National Competitiveness Council [NCC], 2009). The reforms within the education system and increases in education investment since the 1960s were regularly credited with enabling Ireland to take advantage of new business opportunities arising from globalisation (NCC, 2009). There are many diverging views to the premise that the education system was a key driver in the Irish economic success of the Celtic Tiger years. Many policy researchers have named the education system as a central mechanism for maintaining and mirroring broader

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inequalities prevalent in Irish society (NESF, 1997; Area Development Management [ADM], 2003). As pointed out in the previous chapter this has been linked to Ireland not being a more equitable society as a result of the economic growth but rather a society that witnessed an unequal distribution of benefits among its population.

It is clear that Irish society in general has benefited enormously from wider participation in education and the substantial increase in the number of young people graduating from third level in recent years. According to the Department of Education and Science (2004, p. 17), the:

> 35 year period from 1965 to 2000 saw the number of students in third level education grow from 18,200 to almost 120,000. These rapidly growing numbers reflect increasing retention rates at second level, demographic trends and higher transfer rates into third level education.

However, in spite of this increase in general participation:

> Social class background and parental education are significantly associated with a range of educational outcomes among young people in Ireland, including reading and mathematics performance, grades achieved in State examinations, and how long young people remain in the educational system. (Smyth & McCoy, 2009, p.11)

The 1990s was seen as a decade of educational reform which included a focus on the underlying principles within education. Much consideration was given to this topic at the time of the Education Convention in 1993 and the lead up to the White

Paper on Education (DES, 1995) and the enactment of the Education Act

(Government of Ireland, 1998).Outlining the necessity to clarify a *philosophical*

rationale, Dunne (1995) questioned what education policy was striving for and what

it should look like in the future. These questions were mirrored by international

dialogue and included issues such as excellence versus efficiency and external versus

internal influences on education. Dunne pointed out, "A practice [operation of any

system] declines if extrinsic considerations predominate" (p.124), such as the

economy. He argued for the importance of maintaining clarity and focus on what is

essential at the core of education if we are to design and implement meaningful

education policies.

According to O'Sullivan (2005), viewing education as a commodity is one of

the consequences of the Irish Government viewing globalisation as a priority for

education. He argued that this trend has shifted the emphasis of education as a

prerequisite to equal participation to being a commodity subject to market forces.

O'Sullivan viewed the educational reform in Ireland since the 1950s as having

undergone a shift from a *theocentric* to a *mercantile* paradigm and that this transition

was more than a response to market-like conditions in schools. He contended that

this transition represented a "broader cultural transformation which valorises

trade/exchange dispositions together with the social settings and organizational forms

which exemplify them to the extent that they become normative" (p. 107).

There has been criticism of the narrow view of the purpose of education and

the subsequent narrowing of schooling. However, this is much less the case at

primary level mainly due to the adoption of several reforms such as the (revised)

primary school curriculum developed in 1999 (Government of Ireland, 1999a). The curriculum aimed to incorporate the recommendations of the Review of the Primary Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1990) and encompass the philosophical thrust of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (previous or new curriculum, 1971) and the 1998 Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1999a). According to the Minister of Education, at that time, the curriculum "...represents a process of revision that is both evolutionary and developmental; it is designed to cater for the needs of children in the modern world" (Government of Ireland, p.vi). This was broadly welcomed as an exciting opportunity for change and renewal in primary level education and some pertinent reforms followed.

Change was also evidenced through the adoption of some of the recommendations of the Cromien Report (DES, 2000)[11] which the Government acted upon from June 2001. This played a part in the establishment of a number of agencies such as the State Examinations Commission, a National Council for Special Education, the NEWB, a network of Regional Offices and the transfer of responsibilities relating to the Institutes of Technology to the Higher Education Authority. These changes are examples of a willingness to shift towards a more strategic role for the DES at the central level while promoting the dispersion of service delivery to the regions through new structures. However, in practice the

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[11] This refers to a review by Seán Cromien into the DES's operations, systems and staffing needs commissioned by the Minister of the Department completed in October, 2000.

regionalisation policy has met with mixed success in terms of real devolution from the central domain of the DES. It appears that the establishment of a number of bodies along with the regional offices has de-centralised the DES at least, at an administrative level. Archer (2007) refers to the implementation of the plan to truly decentralise as an example of where partners can agree in principle but not in practice. The sharing of governance between the state and other stakeholders is worth looking at here as it is an important policy context for future partnerships or integrated provision.

Partnership and Policy Making

Archer (2007) suggested that partnership between the state and other stakeholders has always been a feature of policy making in education in Ireland. He explained that since the 1920s and up to the present time this sharing of governance has taken many forms. He outlined examples of the complexity of the interaction over the decades. He concluded that there was evidence of times when policy was agreed based upon consensus, other times that the government appeared to cede its policy-making function to particular stakeholders and times when initiatives were abandoned due to opposition of stakeholders and also examples of when the government persisted with policy in the face of vigorous opposition from a stakeholder (Archer, 2007).

There are different versions of the historical role of the DES in directing policy and in early formation of the Irish state this was intrinsically linked to the role of the Catholic Church in providing and managing schools. According to Archer (2007) and O'Buachalla (1988), the DES held a tight control on issues such as curriculum in

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spite of appearing not to interfere with internal matters. As mentioned in the previous

chapter, Fahey (1992) argued that state intervention was evident through the

enforcement of the School Attendance Act, (Government of Ireland, 1926) and that

this was at variance with the perceived non-interventionist policy of the state that

appeared to concede to the Catholic Church and displayed an unwillingness to

interfere with family matters.

In recent years all Government policy, including education policy, has been

framed within an increased engagement in the established tradition of (social)

partnership. The establishment of the National Council for Curriculum and

Assessment (NCCA) in 2001 is another example of partnership. It was established as

a statutory agency to advise the Minister for Education on the curriculum and

assessment for early childhood education and primary and post-primary levels. Its'

board is made up of representatives of teacher unions, school management

organisations, parents' groups, industry and trade union interests and operates on a

consensual basis.

However, given the increasing social and cultural diversity in Irish society,

consensus has become more difficult to achieve with those who are not represented

within the newly-formed structures deeming themselves to be excluded (OECD,

2004). From the mid 2000s the increasing pressures included the fast rate of change

within Irish society and strain was placed on all parts of the education system. At

primary level the articulated tensions for competing resources included class size

(with the Republic of Ireland having the second largest class size in the EU), the

building programme (many of the school buildings are outdated and in need of repair

and the absence of primary school buildings in some large new urban areas), the provision of support for children with special needs, promoting inclusion (currently focused on the dramatic increase of children attending primary school where English is not their first language) and investing in Information Communications Technology (OECD, 2004).

Much of the reforms were embedded through the extensive legislative framework, some of which have already been mentioned, such as the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), but also the Qualifications Education and Training Act (Government of Ireland ,1999b), the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000), the Official Languages Act (Government of Ireland, 2003) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). Other notable reforms and restructuring within the DES included the establishment of a number of independent and or statutory agencies to direct work in particular areas. Notable among these have been the National Council for Special Education (2003), the NEWB (2002) and the Teaching Council (2006). According to the OECD (2004) understanding the implications of these new legislative directives and learning how to interface with new agencies and organisations added to the complexity of educational change for all the partners in education, and will continue to be a significant feature of Irish education for the short to medium term.

Partnership, Social Exclusion and Inequality

Much of the dialogue over the past 10 to 20 years in relation to tackling educational disadvantage has taken place within the context of tackling social exclusion under the influence of National and European Strategies. These include the

Lisbon Strategy[12], the social partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress*[13], the

National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS)[14], and the National Action Plans against

Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAPs/incl)[15], as well as several programmes for

government. All have had a role in driving educational reform in the broader context

of tackling poverty and social exclusion. The partnership agreement *Towards 2016*

included a commitment to "further develop measures to combat early school leaving

and enhancing attendance, educational progression, retention and attainment at

primary and second levels" (Government of Ireland, 2006, p.31). A range of other

Government measures also played an important role in addressing social exclusion

through an increased emphasis on social inclusion initiatives at regional, county and

local level (Local Development Social Inclusion Programme[16] [LDSIP], 2000-

2006).The significant issue here is that all these initiatives involved working in

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[12] One of the objectives set at the Lisbon European Council (March, 2000) was to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion by 2010.

[13] Sustaining Progress 2003-2005 was the sixth in the series of Partnership agreements and included ten special initiatives, one of which is entitled *Tackling Educational Disadvantage: Literacy, Numeracy and Early School Leavers*.

[14] NAPS, introduced in 1997, and revised in 2002, is focused on five key areas, one of which is educational disadvantage.

[15] Each EU member state is required to produce a National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAPs/incl), The second NAPs/incl, covering the period 2003-2005, was submitted to the European Commission in July, 2003 by the Irish Government. A central theme of the NAPs/incl, 2003-2005, is to ensure that all young people leave the education system with a high quality education and related qualifications to support their full participation in society and the economy.

[16] This programme, established under the National Development Plan was implemented at a local level by 38 partnerships, 33 community groups and 4 employment Pacts to counter disadvantage and promote equality and social and economic inclusion.

partnership and most included a focus on combating educational inequality (ADM, 2003).

At educational governance levels, "concern with educational inequality dates back to the Investment in Education Report (DES, 1966) which indicated significant social class and regional disparities in educational participation" (Smyth & McCoy, 2009, p.13). The responses to the Green Paper (Government of Ireland, 1992) and the discussion at the Education Convention of 1993 were acknowledged by Coolahan (1994) as an example of the prioritisation, by all the main partners in education, of attention towards tackling educational disadvantage. Coolahan explained that there was an eagerness shown by most of the school authorities and the teacher unions: "to tackle, as a matter of urgency, the most serious educational failure problems at primary and secondary levels, and a wide acceptance of the necessity of prioritising resource allocation to tackling this problem"(1994, p. 108).

The extensive treatment afforded to equality issues within the Green Paper (Government of Ireland, 1993) was seen by Coolahan as a signal of the priority of reforming the education system. According to Devine (2004, p.114), education reform during the late 1990s and early 2000s included a greater focus on equality issues than heretofore. There was increasing emphasis on the importance of education in creating and maintaining individuals that can participate in their community and society and it was widely acknowledged across most western societies that access to education is every child's right (United Nations Children's Fund, 2007). This recognition was apparent in Ireland through the National Children's Strategy ([NSC] Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2000), a

social inclusion measure designed to progress the implementation of the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Human Rights [1989], ratified by the Irish government in 1992).

The strategy claimed to:

> Provide a coherent policy statement which reflects the aspirations and
>
> concerns of children themselves and those who care about them. It is
>
> focused on all children and how to make changes in their lives for the
>
> better over the next ten years. (DHC, 2000, p. 4)

The strategy emphasised the need to establish a *whole child* perspective at the

centre of all relevant policy development and service delivery and to improve the

quality of children's lives through integrated delivery of services in partnership with

children, young people, their families and their communities. According to the

strategy the whole child perspective drew on research and knowledge of children's

development and the relationship between children and family, community and the

wider society. It identified the capacity of children to shape their lives as they grow,

while also being shaped and supported by the world around them. The Strategy

identified three national goals including: (a) giving children a voice in matters which

affect them; (b) understanding children's lives better through the benefit of

evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of

services; and (c) providing children with quality supports and services to promote all

aspects of their development.

In recognition of the challenges of delivering these three goals and establishing

the whole child perspective centrally in policy development and service delivery the

strategy recognised the need for a special effort by all those involved in its

implementation at national and local level. New structures were proposed to drive

this change and support its delivery and included the establishment of the National

Children's Office[17]. The emphasis being placed on the importance of integration is

worth noting here as the NSC (DHC, 2000) stated that the "Children's Office will be

the catalyst within the Government's administrative system for ensuring

interdepartmental co-operation and the integration of activities on children's issues"

(p. 85). It stated that all government departments with a children's focus will be

responsible for working with the national office "in the preparation and

implementation of detailed action plans which will give effect to the National Goals"

(p. 87).

A significant development in this regard was the establishment of an Early

Years Education Policy Unit (2005) within the Department of Education and co-

located within the OMC (OMC, 2005). The purpose of this was to oversee the

development of early year's education policy and initiatives. In addition, at national

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[17] The National Children's Office (NCO) was established in 2001 to lead and oversee the implementation of the National Children's Strategy. In December 2005, the government set up the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) which incorporated the work of the NCO. The Minister attended cabinet meetings with the status of a junior Minister. The OMC was renamed the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) in May 2008. Recently (June, 2011) a full government cabinet ministry has been formed to incorporate the OMCYA and other functions. The new department will be known as the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

level, an Implementation Group, chaired by the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) and involving the relevant Government departments, Health Service Executive (HSE), representatives of local authorities, the education sector and other key agencies as required, linked with the Expert Advisory Group on Children, was established by the HSE. This was also to be matched at a local level by the development of a multi-agency Children's Services Committee to be established within each of the City/County Development Boards. These committees were to be chaired by the HSE and focused on achieving coordinated and integrated services for children and families. It was also intended that the Government Office with overarching responsibility for tackling poverty, the Office for Social Inclusion, would work closely with the OMC in promoting the social inclusion agenda in relation to children and their families, and in identifying and driving strategic responses in this area (OMC, 2005).

In addition to this central objective of integration there were other specific aspirations mentioned in the strategy that focused on education policy that are relevant to this review. The NCS committed to enhancing the approaches that had been developed in recent years within the education system "...to tackle and actively compensate for these inequalities" (DHC, 2000, p.53). The most significant stated objectives included the delivery of education structures at local level; and the enactment of legislation and other policies such as the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000), the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999) and the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998). It also provided a context for expenditure on educational disadvantage at all levels including a new

scheme for disadvantaged schools at primary level (Giving Children and Even Break); the development of a primary pupil database; promotion of measures to tackle early school leaving; guidance initiatives; expansion of school development planning and a national policy on after-school and out-of-school care services to support the provision of a quality service. It is worth noting that progress has been made on some of these objectives while others, particularly the primary school database and the national policy for out-of-school services, have not been put in place.

One of the objectives of the NCS (DHC, 2000) where progress has been made is related to research on children's lives. As a result there is now in place a longitudinal study on children's lives *Growing up in Ireland* and a *State of the Nation's Children* report which is produced in a biennial series by the OMCYA. The latter report aims to provide the most up-to-date data on all indicators within the national set of child well-being indicators. The third biennial State of the Nation's Children report was published (OMCYA, 2010) and aimed to chart the well-being of children in Ireland, track changes over time, benchmark progress in Ireland relative to other countries and highlight policy issues arising. Improvements made since publication of the previous report (OMCYA, 2008) have allowed further disaggregation across vulnerable groups of children due mainly to the cooperation of a number of data providers that have contributed data in relation to Traveller children, immigrant children and children with a disability and/or chronic illness. These reports can be an important source of data on children which through the

provision of readily available national and international comparisons assists the planning and development of relevant policy.

Educational Disadvantage Policy Initiatives

Several significant developments have taken place in Ireland to specifically tackle educational disadvantage. One of these was the establishment of the Educational Disadvantage Centre (EDC) in 2000 in St. Patrick's College. The EDC, in its objective to highlight the implications of social and economic disadvantage on education within the primary school sector in Ireland placed emphasis on a collaborative (including all the main stakeholders) planning process. This led to a week-long national forum in July 2002 on *Primary Education and Ending Disadvantage*. The main priorities of the forum included the development of an interdisciplinary approach to learning from national and international research, sharing the learning from school-based and initiative-based responses, support for parents, teachers and community providers and an opportunity to critically reflect on action to date. The overarching ambition of the forum was to develop a comprehensive action plan that would end educational disadvantage (Gilligan, 2002).

In recognition of the continuing challenge faced by the many measures and initiatives designed to turn back the tide of early school leaving and poor attainment the Educational Disadvantage Committee was established in 2002, under section 32 of the Education Act (1998). This was established as a statutory body with responsibility for advising the Minister for Education. One of its primary roles included the examination of the wide range of programmes that were already in place to tackle educational disadvantage. During its three-year term of office (2002-2005)

the committee received several submissions and conducted a review of international literature and of strategy in Ireland (Archer & Weir, 2005) and culminated its work with a final report *Moving beyond Educational Disadvantage* (DES, 2005b). This report acknowledged the adoption of much of its previous recommendations through the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS[18])* (DES, 2005a) initiative, particularly the focus on school-based solutions, such as the implementation of the plan to address problems with literacy and numeracy in disadvantaged areas, early unqualified school leaving, improving the rate of retention to the Leaving Certificate and transfer to further and higher education and training for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report proposed the adoption of a broader framework which acknowledged that the problems of educational disadvantage cannot be solved in mainstream school-based programmes alone but is strongly affected by the wider community and society.

At the same time other government Departments were being encouraged to work together to deliver more accurate targeting of services for children, as already referred to (OMC, 2007). One that is very relevant to children's well-being was *The Agenda for Children Services* (OMC, 2007). The focus of *The Agenda for Children's Services* was on the key messages of existing policies in relation to children and to promote: (a) a whole child/whole system approach to meeting the needs of children;

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[18] DEIS is the Irish word for opportunity. The by-line of the heading is Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools. The action plan is fully explained in the next section of this chapter.

and (b) a focus on better outcomes for children and families (OMC, 2007). The agenda recognised the benefits of cross-fertilisation of ideas which could result in more effective delivery of services, combining impact and ensuring better outcomes for children. Alongside these policy developments, a little earlier, a similar development had been envisaged through the intentions behind DEIS, the most recent policy strategy focused on educational disadvantage and inclusion which will be described in the next section.

DEIS – An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion

The Department of Education and Science, until 2005, operated a number of initiatives, in primary schools, designed to tackle the consequences of economic and social impediments to education, including some initiatives tackling poor attendance. The programmes included the Early Start Programme (1994); Giving Children an Even Break (2001) (incorporating the primary Disadvantaged Areas Scheme (1984) and Breaking the Cycle (1996)); the Support Teacher Project; a number of specific early literacy initiatives, including the Reading Recovery Initiative; the Home School Community Liaison Scheme; the School Completion Programme (funded under the National Development Plan with assistance from the European Social Fund) and the primary and second-level School Books Grant Schemes. These schemes were considered to be mixed in terms of impact and in terms of coordination and evaluation (Government of Ireland, 2006; DES, 2005a).

DEIS was introduced in 2006/2007 and is the most recent programme of assistance to schools serving students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The aim of DEIS is to "ensure that the educational needs of children and young people from

disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed" (DES, 2005a, p. 9). Its core elements are an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) and a standardised system for identifying and reviewing levels of disadvantage (DES, 2005a). DEIS, also referred to as the action plan, aimed to adopt a more integrated and focused approach: "supported by a much increased emphasis on target-setting and measurement of progress and outcomes" (2005a, p.3). Most primary schools, even if they only had very small numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, received some additional funding under the programme.

Schools assessed as having the highest levels of disadvantaged (340 urban primary, 340 rural primary, and 200 post-primary) were invited to participate in the SSP component of DEIS. In the urban primary category schools were divided into two 'bands' depending on their assessed levels of disadvantage. Band 1 (about 200 schools) availed of additional supports such as reduced class size at junior class levels due to their greater concentrations of disadvantage than those in Band 2. This policy approach of targeting schools with the greatest concentration of disadvantage appears to be in line with evidence from research in Ireland that the achievement disadvantages associated with poverty are exacerbated when large proportions of students in a school are from poorer backgrounds (Sofroniou, Archer & Weir, 2004). This is known as the *multiplier effect* or the *social context effect* (DES, 2005c; DES, 2011).

According to the DES (2011) DEIS acknowledges that the circumstances of different schools vary, and that schools have to use varied responses to meet the needs of their students and communities. The DES sees the DEIS initiative as an

opportunity and requirement for schools to determine their own needs, set their own

targets, and use resources as they think best. However, it also points out that the

achievement of literacy and numeracy outcomes "...is among the key areas in which

schools are expected to improve while supported by the DEIS initiative. A strong

emphasis is placed on schools establishing their baseline data, on setting attainment

targets and actions, and on monitoring the outcomes" (DES, 2011, p.63). The action

plan was introduced on a phased basis over five years and involved 10 key measures

of implementation including: "...to enhance student attendance, educational

progression, retention and attainment" (DES, 2005a, p. 11). The Department

commissioned the Educational Research Centre (ERC) to conduct an evaluation of

measures and supports provided to schools under DEIS. In addition, the Inspectorate

of the Department was asked to evaluate how effective schools were at identifying

and setting targets for improvement, at implementing changes to their practice, and at

monitoring their effectiveness in achieving real improvements in learning outcomes

for students. The Inspectorate was also asked to identify examples of good practice

where DEIS schools were being particularly successful in raising literacy and

numeracy standards (DES, 2011, p.63).

According to the Department the evidence emerging from the ERC evaluation

points to positive engagement by school personnel with the range of supports

provided under the school support programme. It also appears that the range of

supports provided to schools is having a positive effect, for example: "the early

indications are that schools are managing to show significant gains in improving the

learning of students who are performing least well in literacy (those scoring at or

below the 10th percentile on tests of reading literacy)" (DES, 2011, p. 63). In addition evidence from Inspectorate evaluations of DEIS schools shows that many schools are managing to set realistic targets for improvement and to use the resources to deliver the planned improvements (DES, 2011). The Department also seemed to imply that a more strategic focus is needed at school level and that "experience in implementing the DEIS strategy over the past three years has demonstrated clearly that whole-school commitment is essential to achieving change and improvement, and that every teacher is a key agent of change" (DES, 2010, p. 12).

NESF (2009) reported that DEIS was a well-designed policy and included policy objectives, targets and outcomes. However, NESF claimed to have identified a number of weaknesses within the plan, such as: (a) the plan was not delivered as first envisaged, either in the timeframe or in the full range of services provided; (b) there appeared to be variation in the timing and quality of training and supports available to schools; and (c) the initial plan to include an early childhood education element appeared to have been dropped. NESF also mentioned concerns about the weakness in relation to out-of-school elements such as homework clubs; especially for children not attending DEIS schools. Another weakness identified by NESF that is very relevant to this review was concerned with integration: "DEIS policy and implementation has been slow to capture community strengths and resources and link them to national strategies in any systematic way" (NESF, 2009, p.125). The forthcoming report from the ERC on the evaluation of DEIS at primary level seems likely to present a more positive picture of DEIS than that of the NESF.

In 2007, the ERC gathered data on the achievements in reading and mathematics of pupils in 120 schools participating in the urban dimension of the School Support Programme (SSP) under DEIS. In 2010, follow-up achievement data were collected from pupils in the same 120 schools. A comparison of the achievements of pupils in 2007 with their counterparts in 2010 revealed that the latter group had significantly higher test scores in reading and mathematics at each grade level tested. A comparison of the same pupils' achievements on two occasions (e.g., those in 2nd class in 2007 with their scores on a different level of the test in 5th class in 2010) also showed significant improvements. The ERC appears to have found no evidence for some of the weaknesses claimed in the NESF report especially in relation to links between local and national targets (P. Archer, July 2011 personal communication).

DEIS is, therefore, one element of a continuum of interventions to address disadvantage, which include second-chance education and training and access measures for adults to support increased participation by under-represented groups in further and higher education. Another element of this continuum is the ongoing development of provision for pupils with special educational needs in light of the enactment of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). This was enacted to ensure that persons with special educational needs could be educated where possible in an inclusive environment, with the same rights to education as persons without special educational needs and to ensure that such persons are equipped by the education system with the skills they need to participate in society and to live independent and fulfilled lives. This past

section aimed to outline the policy initiatives designed to lessen educational

disadvantage and social exclusion. It is now intended to focus on the legislation and

policy implementation specifically focused on school attendance. The extent of

absenteeism in Ireland is firstly presented to outline the context for policy

development and implementation.

The Extent of Absenteeism in Ireland

In Ireland, the fourth in a series of reports based on data collected by the

NEWB on non-attendance in primary and post-primary schools, provides

information on school attendance returns for 2007/8 and compares these figures with

the previous four years (Millar, 2010). According to this report, annual percentage

student days lost in 2007/8 were 6.5% in primary and 7.7% in post-primary schools.

This is equivalent to 12 days lost per pupil per year at primary level and 13 days at

post-primary level. Across the five years the range of values for primary is 0.3%

(between a minimum of 6.2% and a maximum of 6.5%) and for post-primary 0.6%

(between 7.5% and 8.1%). Millar pointed out that, "The percentage of twenty-day

absences continued in the range of approximately 11-12% in primary schools and 16-

18% in post primary schools" (p.6). The 2007/8 figure for primary schools was at the

top of the range, while for post-primary the figure was lower for 2007/8 than for the

previous year. It is worth noting here that the figure for 2006/7 (coinciding with the

year in which my study was carried out) was 10.9% for over twenty days absent in

primary schools.

Millar (2010) suggested that these data related to non-attendance for the entire

population of students and should be distinguished from non-attendance in a

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particular school. In other words, non-attendance was previously treated as a feature

of the population of pupils nationally, and the statistic was computed and presented

accordingly (Millar). On this basis, "schools don't enter the picture except for their

role in providing the data" (Millar, p. 8). However, an index that showed to what

extent each school was affected by the phenomenon of non-attendance was also

computed because "such school-based indices of non-attendance are essential in

establishing relationships between non-attendance and other school-based measures

of educational disadvantage, such as retention rates and academic achievement"

(Millar, p. 8). They were needed to link non-attendance to aspects of disadvantage

described only at school level.

Millar explained that the NEWB non-attendance data gathered from primary

schools was merged with data maintained by the Education Research Centre[19] (ERC)

on the same schools. The ERC data, from a nationwide survey of disadvantage,

conducted in 2005 in all mainstream primary schools, included details on school

location and level of disadvantage. The findings from the merged data indicated that

non-attendance in all forms was higher in urban schools and that this was in line with

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[19] The Education Research Centre (ERC) was established on the campus of St Patrick's (Teacher Training) College, Dublin in January, 1966. The Centre works at all levels of the education system, from pre-school to third level and its establishment was a means of widening the scope of, and making for greater continuity in, education research in Ireland.

the figures for previous years. The report also highlighted the fact that the twenty-day absences variable distinguished urban from rural schools much more sharply than general non-attendance did. In calculating these figures, as opposed to obtaining the general, national picture of absenteeism, the percentage of days lost was calculated for each school. A national mean and standard deviation was then calculated. There were considerable differences between schools as shown by the large standard deviation (11.89). This means that some schools had no pupils absent for twenty or more days while others had more than one fifth of pupils missing this number of days (Millar, 2010).

In addition to information on school location, the ERC data provided information on levels of disadvantage in schools. The 2005 survey was used as the basis of assigning schools to initiative the School Support Programme (SSP)[20] under DEIS "SSP schools experience higher levels of disadvantage than non-SSP schools" and "....for urban schools there are two SSP bands, with schools in band 1 experiencing greater levels of disadvantage" (Millar, 2010, p.11). A comparison of the figures for non-attendance and twenty-day absences led Millar to conclude that it is twenty-day absences that are most closely linked to the DEIS categories. Even though the categories of *Urban Not in SSP* in both 2006/7 and 2007/8 had higher non-attendance than *Rural in SSP* Millar found a substantial difference in twenty-

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[20] An integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which brought together a number of existing schemes and programmes under DEIS.

day absences between the lowest and the highest DEIS categories. It also placed schools, from lowest to highest-scoring for twenty-day absences, in the same order as their DEIS rankings, which is not the case for general non-attendance. The current national attendance data provides the context for legislative and policy designed to lessen poor attendance.

Irish School Attendance Policy and Implementation

Prior to the introduction of the Education Welfare Act (2000), legislation pertaining to compulsory school attendance dated back to 1926. Under this legislation, all children between the ages of 6 and 15 years were legally obliged to attend school. The 1926 legislation provided for a school attendance service, through the establishment of School Attendance Committees in the Local Authorities: Dublin City, Cork City, Waterford City and the borough of Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown. The committees in turn appointed School Attendance Officers (SAOs) to enforce the provisions of the legislation. In all other areas of the country responsibility for the enforcement of the 1926 Act remained with the Garda Síochána[21]. Under the 1926 Act failure by a parent or a guardian to comply with the provisions could result in the intervention of the SAO or Garda and, in some cases, in the initiation of court proceedings to ensure the child's constitutional right to a minimum education.

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[21] Garda Síochána is Ireland's National Police Service.

Juvenile Liaison Officers were appointed from within the Garda Síochána and the SAO, parents and schools could call on their assistance in dealing with non-attendance. There was however, no statutory responsibility under the 1926 legislation on school authorities to notify the School Attendance Service of voluntary or involuntary school attendance (Murphy, 2000).

The growing concern about early school leaving and educational disadvantage led to an increased call for a comprehensive school attendance system, including a review of the operation of the School Attendance Acts and an examination of the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies involved. This was carried out by the Department of Education and the resulting *School Attendance/Truancy Report* was published in 1994. Subsequently a wide range of positive measures have been introduced to address early school leaving and educational disadvantage, as mentioned in the previous section. There was growing recognition that to "be effective, [new measures] must be complemented with a more multidimensional approach to address in a more focused way the root causes of early school leaving" (NESF, 2002, p. ix). Building on the various strategies and policy developments that related to educational disadvantage, it appeared that this was an opportune time to strengthen policies. The NESF stated that an example of a key development in this regard was the National Educational Welfare Service. The next section is entirely focused on the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) and the establishment of the NEWB and Service as it is central to this review.

NEWB – A Multi-dimensional Response

Many would claim that the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) was a landmark moment in the history of Irish Government education policy. The Act repealed the School Attendance Acts 1926 to 1967 and aims to provide for the entitlement of every child in the state to a certain minimum education. It includes the registration of children receiving education in places other than recognised schools and the compulsory attendance of certain children at recognised schools. The Act also applies to all young people aged 16 and 17 who leave school to take up employment. The aims of the Act include "...to promote and foster in society and in particular in families, an appreciation of the benefits to be derived from education" (Section 10a). It provides for the establishment of a single national body (the NEWB) and the coordination of its activities and of other persons with a responsibility for school attendance (Education (Welfare) Act [Government of Ireland, 2000]).

A designate Board was established under the auspices of the Minister of Education in 2001 and given full statutory responsibility to implement the Act in 2002. The mission of the NEWB was to ensure that each child attended a recognised school or otherwise received an education and to advise the Government on any related matters. According to the NEWB the legislation was broad in its vision and comprehensive in its intent and it provided a new opportunity to realise the aspiration that all young people would participate fully in and benefit from their education.

Introduction of this legislation was accompanied by significant changes such as the establishment of a statutory agency (NEWB) to oversee school attendance policy

with a focus on meeting the welfare needs of children and their families as a means of counteracting school non-attendance. The compulsory school leaving age was raised from 15 to 16 years or completion of three years in post-primary education, whichever is later. The statutory responsibilities outlined in the Act included notification by the schools to locally based Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) of children with unsatisfactory school attendance patterns and an obligation to produce admission and discipline policies.

There was some delay in setting up the National Education Welfare Service as it was, like all policy initiatives, not starting from a clean slate. The establishment of the service was complex and included industrial relations negotiations over a number of months. This included the transfer to the Board of 37 school attendance officers, formerly employed by local authorities under the previous legislation. One of the issues raised is a good example of the complexities that often arise when trying to change systems. This involved the take up of the full range of EWO duties to provide a year-round service rather than the school-term based service that they provided as school attendance officers (NEWB, 2003).

In a pre-budget submission NEWB (2006a) outlined an update of its service delivery and highlighted the main shortfall in providing the service that is required of them. Developments included the establishment of the educational welfare service, development of support services, data gathering and analysis, and research and strategic planning. The NEWB's Strategic Plan *Every Day Counts* outlined progress to date and plans for the continued expansion for the period 2005-2007 (NEWB,

2006b). In one such submission it accepted that it needed to develop in stages, however, it also highlighted that:

> A huge cohort of children that are missing out on education have needs that go well beyond the developing capacity of the organisation at present. The numbers of students entitled to a service from NEWB under the terms of the legislation far outstrips the current capacity to respond. (NEWB, 2006b, p.5)

NEWB (2006b) continued by stressing that the ratio of EWOs to school population in Ireland was significantly below international norms; the management of the demand for the service required the Board's Educational Welfare Service to prioritise children with the most significant levels of absenteeism, thus running the risk of developing as a reactive, fire-fighting service, rather than as a proactive, prevention-focused service as envisaged in the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000).

In the strategic plan of the NEWB (2006b), there was an emphasis on creating an organisation to provide a service to the entire country, including every school and all other sites of education provision. Two years later, at the 2008 inaugural conference on school attendance organised by the NEWB the CEO's paper updated the priorities for the service and provided an indication of the continuing interpretation of its role.

These priorities emphasised the approach adopted by the NEWB as working with children and parents experiencing difficulties in relation to school attendance

and behaviour through co-coordinating and leading a number of key agencies and services in tackling non-attendance. It saw itself as raising awareness of teachers (including student teachers) of attendance matters and to support schools with the development of evidence-based attendance policy and strategies. It also planned to carry out research to build knowledge and understanding of the factors influencing school attendance, including a review of the influence of school curriculum and the role of school climate in determining children's attendance and participation in school life. Finally the CEO explained that the NEWB aimed to foster awareness in society of the value of education.

While reviewing the early documentation from NEWB certain trends are evident including the shift to the concept of participation from that of attendance and a renewed focus on integration and collaboration. This latter role was enhanced in May 2009 when the Department of Education announced that the Home School Community Liaison [HSCL], the School Completion Programme and the Visiting Teachers Service for Travellers [VTST] would be integrated into NEWB, with effect from September 2009. The NEWB undertook "to develop an integrated model of service building on the combined strengths of the four services (HSCL, SCP, VTST and the Educational Welfare Service) to deliver a child-focused and integrated approach to school attendance, retention and participation" (NEWB, 2009).

Prior to this development, the NEWB in 2008 had initiated a pilot project (described in the previous chapter) to develop a model service which aimed to "outline the nature of the new way of working with vulnerable children and families in collaboration with schools and other colleagues in education support services in

relation to school attendance and placement matters" (NEWB, 2009, p. 2). According to NEWB this represented a shift from "focusing solely on raw attendance data" and "recognises the role of schools in early intervention" (p.2). The intention of NEWB after the success of the pilot was to extend its implementation to other areas. Following on from the announcement of the integration of HSCL, SCP and the VTST into NEWB the schools were advised by the NEWB that, "...at school and school cluster and local area levels, there will be no immediate changes to the operation of HSCL, SCP or the VTST. Each will continue to operate to ensure continuity of services to schools, families and communities" (p.1).

Based on the compelling overall premise, outlined in the literature chapter and learning from policy implementation, that early patterns of non-attendance are habit forming, the case for a clear policy, at both primary and post-primary level, to highlight the importance of the issue and provide guidance on school attendance is well founded (McCoy et al., 2007). Railsback (2004, as cited in McCoy et al., 2007, pp. 68-70) promoted attendance policies as they "can help to foster self-discipline in students; to dictate appropriate behaviour and determine consequences for actions", (pp. 68- 70). McCoy et al. made a number of recommendations for policy makers in an effort to address poor attendance.

These included the continuation of targeting disadvantaged schools; focusing more on engaging students in school life; giving more support to students who lack confidence in their academic abilities; promoting a positive school climate and improving relationships between students and teachers. These initiatives would be further embedded by each school identifying students with high levels of

absenteeism as 'at risk' of early school leaving and targeting resources at re-engaging these students (McCoy et al.).

Conclusion

Observing policy and legislative changes that impact on the lives of children and their families, in general, and tapering in towards a focus on educational disadvantage and specifically on measures designed to curtail absenteeism at primary level we can appreciate the need for integration, by all involved. Examining Irish education policy with a particular focus on educational disadvantage and school attendance has raised a number of key issues. This is predictable as the policy process is fluid, as pointed out by Ball (2003), and, therefore, policy work should be viewed as being evolutionary in its nature.

All new policy design and implementation affects existing policies, sometimes overtly and sometimes subtly. The interpretation of policy will vary depending on the context and time in which it is introduced. The main elements that I have outlined here that will assist the discourse with the study's findings include: (a) the implications for systematic change arising from past policy and implementation; and (b) the relative and relational nature of policy implementation in the area of disadvantage and absenteeism. In conjunction with the conclusions arising from the previous chapter (literature) and this review of overall policy context a foundational backdrop to the study is in place which will allow for focused dialogue with the outcomes of the research.

CHAPTER 4: STUDY DESIGN and METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the strategy, design and methodology applied to the research study. It includes a rationale for the approach adopted, assumptions made and the perceived limitations of the study. In designing a relevant research project on absenteeism at primary school level, one of the priorities adopted was to ensure that this disciplined inquiry was conducted in a systematic way to ensure the validity of the findings and their contribution to the knowledge already available on absenteeism in primary schools. Another priority was to avoid placing an undue additional burden on others, particularly on children and families but also on teachers and other professional staff involved with school absenteeism. This required the exploration of possible data sources that might already be available for investigation. The focus on data that were already available in static format, as supplied in school roll books[22], determined the methods used in Phase 1. The findings from this phase were then used to inform the content of the instruments (questions in a semi-structured interview) used in Phase 2.

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[22] Roll Books record the name, address, and registration number of each child together with a daily attendance record, a total attendance for each quarter and a total annual attendance. (Rule 123 of the 1965 Rules and Regulations for National Schools (DES).

The research adopted a case study research strategy and applied a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (outlined in detail below). The rationale for case study as the chosen methodology is explained through clarification of decisions relating to the design of the study. The subsequent sections include details of the methods and protocols adopted in each of the phases. The final sections in this chapter outline the ethical considerations applied and the limitations of this study.

Research Strategy

A case study methodology was deemed appropriate for a phenomenon such as poor attendance as it offers a way of providing "...in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring in that particular instance" (Denscombe, 2003, p. 32). It also attempts to explore aspects of the human condition in its real life context (Robson, 1993). The case being studied relates to the phenomenon of school attendance. The location of the study in two particular urban-based primary schools assisted with the task of allowing the researcher to focus on relationships and processes which are fundamental to understanding patterns and trends of poor attendance.

According to Yin (2006), case studies are best employed to address explanatory or descriptive questions which strive to develop a: "firsthand understanding of people and events" (Yin, 2006, p.112). Thus the case study strategy fitted with the quest to understand poor attendance as experienced in a specific site. This linked with another rationale for adopting a case study strategy as: "...it allows for the use of a variety of methods, depending on the circumstances and specific needs of the situation" (Denscombe, 2003). Robson (1993) explained that a multiple

source of evidence, including quantitative and qualitative data assists in the investigation of the particular. Involving two methods allowed for triangulation of findings of Phase 1 and Phase 2. In addition, the inclusion of the different perspectives due to the varied backgrounds of the interviewees resulted in a cross checking and corroboration of findings and thereby added to the validity of the case study (Denscombe, 2003). The selection of interviewees were deemed suitable due to two main considerations; firstly due to their role and responsibilities in relation to attendance at these specific schools and secondly due to the inherent varied perspectives through the operation of various strategies and initiatives to tackle and respond to poor attendance.

Examining poor attendance in two particular schools allowed the level of focus that was required to ensure the systematic collection and analysis of data. The particular schools were selected as they met a number of criteria including: (a) located in urban settings and in receipt of additional resources due to their disadvantaged status and (b) the population of students was over 200 (and thereby a reasonable sample size), of mixed gender and included members of ethnic minorities. The findings from this study are limited to schools of this type and therefore there is limited generalisability from this research. However, the learning from this research could be built upon through additional comparative studies with schools of this type. As outlined above, I sought to gather data through a mixed methods approach as this provided a source for triangulation across and within the various methods.

Research Design - A Mixed Methods Approach

The concept of mixing different methods, according to Creswell (2003), emerged in the late 1950s when researchers were attempting to investigate psychological traits. Creswell (2003) points out that many researchers were subsequently prompted to apply a *'multimethod matrix'* and to discover multiple approaches to data collection. This has over the past number of decades led to increased use of the mixed methods approach with differing rationale being applied depending on the context used. The mixed methods approach often provided researchers with a mechanism to address the limitations of using either a quantitative or qualitative approach on its own (Creswell, 2003). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), all research is underpinned by philosophical foundations and mixed methods provide a mechanism for naming these assumptions. The benefit derived from acknowledging these underpinning assumptions is that this leads to precision in relation to shaping the processes and conduct of an inquiry.

Pragmatism has been identified by many mixed methods writers as being one of the best fits for this approach (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007: Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism is applicable to this study as it: "draws on many ideas, including applying 'what works,' using diverse approaches, and valuing both objective and subjective knowledge" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 43). It allows a researcher to draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions and to choose, freely, the methods, techniques and procedures of research that best meet her/his needs and purposes (Creswell, 2003). According to Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), the logic of inquiry involved

in the mixed methods approach includes "the use of induction (or discovery of

patterns), deduction (testing of theories or hypotheses), and abduction (uncovering

and relying on the best set of explanations for understanding one's results)" (p.17).

Within the two phases of this research, I undertook to audit the research

process from the beginning ensuring rigour and what Lincoln and Guba (1985)

describe as *confirmability* (p.319). This includes Lincoln and Guba's interpretation

of Halpern's[23] typology called the *confirmability audit*, a check list tool to ensure

that the data, findings, interpretations and recommendations are acceptable. This

useful check list, applied in this study, is particularly appropriate to a mixed methods

study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The discipline imposed by the implementation of the

audit assisted the best standards in relation to raw data collection, data reduction and

analysis, process notes and instrument development information. This provided the

researcher's reflexive guide to the study, including design and methods.

Sequential Explanatory Research Design

The strategy used was a *sequential* procedure in which "the researcher seeks to

elaborate on or expand the findings of one method with another method" (Creswell,

2003, p. 16). The study involved two phases and applied a sequential explanatory

design which is illustrated in figure 1.

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[23] According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the major credit for the operationalisation of the auditing
concept must go to Edward S. Halpern, who in 1983 completed his dissertation at Indiana University
on this topic.

| QUANTITATIVE | | QUALITATIVE |

| QUAN → | QUAN → | QUAL → | QUAL → | Interpretation |
| Data Collection | Data Analysis | Data Collection | Data Analysis | of entire Analysis |
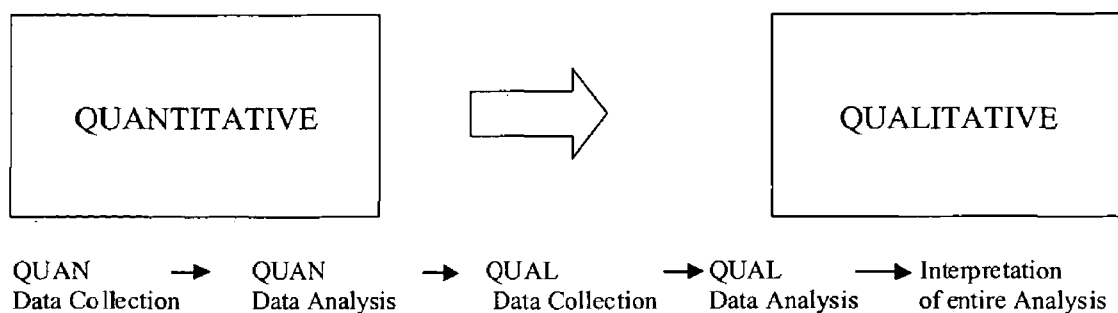
Figure 1. Sequential Explanatory Design (Adapted from Fig.11.2a Creswell, 2003, p. 213).

The sequential explanatory design (also known as the explanatory design) occurs in two distinct interactive phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). These authors, along with Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) encourage researchers to be mindful of four primary decisions which will influence how the study is conducted. These primary considerations include the implementation sequence, relationship between phases, timing and method of mixing the strands.

This design framework suited the investigation underway in this study for a number of reasons. The decision to implement the quantitative phase first coincided with my priorities to engage with data that may already exist and a desire to investigate how it might add to the knowledge of absenteeism in primary schools. This view came from the pragmatic logic that much time and effort was being put into the collection of roll book data. I was also motivated by the knowledge that national data was being collected for the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) and that this might be complemented by research aimed at identifying patterns of absenteeism at individual school level. The need to expand on the objective findings provided the rationale for following up with a qualitative phase in order to further elucidate the research topic of absenteeism. Finally the mixing of

methods at interpretation stage allowed for a depth to the inquiry which the serious topic of absenteeism deserves. Further explanation of these decisions will be given when outlining the exact methods applied in each phase.

Phase 1: Quantitative Method, Data Collection and Data Analysis

Quantitative Method

The first phase of the research study involved designing and implementing a quantitative strand, including the collection and analysis of data. The rationale for applying quantitative methods to this study coincides with relevance or, what Hammersley (2002) calls, practical research. The collection of factual data through quantitative methods applies this practical approach and sets the scene for further investigation.

By the nature of the quantitative style researchers should focus on measurement instruments and issues of sampling, as their "inductive approach emphasizes developing insights and generalizations out of the data collected" (Neuman, 2000, p. 122). The language of quantitative researchers involves variables and hypothesis. According to Neuman the *variable* is, simply put, a concept that varies and can have a relationship with other variables. Shulman (1997) also refers to the language applied as including variables and hypotheses and explains that it is similar to that found in many areas of science that is based on a positivist tradition. Linked to the methodology applied regularly in educational research Shulman gives attention to the concept of *disciplined inquiry*. O'Leary (2005) describes the need to formulate a problem and then to follow through with a methodical collection of data

for the purpose of deriving valid generalisations as what is known as *disciplined inquiry*. This approach sets the scene for Phase 1 of the study as it concerns the systematic review of data already collected in relation to the phenomenon of school attendance.

In order to plan for a disciplined inquiry, Neuman (2000) identified that the first task was to classify the measurable variables into independent (known as cause or a variable that acts on something else) and dependent (the effect or result or outcome of another variable). The dependent variable involved is absenteeism with the independent variables including age, grade, specific teacher and time of the week and year. The variables in question are static and recorded by class room teachers in a regular, systematic way. These figures are also available to each School Principal for the purpose of inspection and returning the final figures to the Department of Education and Skills. Once the variables were clarified it was then necessary to plan for the sample that would be used to provide the quantifiable material. In relation to this study the sampling frame applied is adapted from Denscombe (2003) and includes a focus on relevance, completion, precision and timeliness (see also Neuman, 2000; Wallen & Frankel, 2001).

The selection of two schools situated in an area designated as disadvantaged provides the cluster sample of students that are relevant to this study. Access to attendance information in relation to all of the students ensures the inclusion of all the independent variables and relates them to absenteeism. A good sample excludes the items that are not relevant, according to Rosnow and Rosenthal (1997). In this study, the students (12) that didn't fit the selection criteria were removed from the

active sample. Referring back to the need to ensure validity and reliability it is paramount to explain how the actual sample was selected and how the systematic errors or *artifacts* were removed from the cluster sample, thereby resulting in a relevant and consistent sample (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997; Wallen & Frankel, 2001). This is further explained below in the data analysis section. The applied framework provided a clear rationale and basis for a systematic sample of 306 students. Access to details of attendance, throughout an entire school year, resulted in ensuring that all the relevant information in relation to timeliness was considered. Determining the reliability of the instruments used in Phase 1 ensured that the quantitative phase of the study was conducted in a reliable and consistent fashion (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data collection took place in two specific primary schools situated in an urban area, designated as disadvantaged. As mentioned above, one of the working assumptions in this study is that information, already available from existing sources, could be useful to the investigation of patterns of absenteeism among primary school children. The existence of detailed data, collected, on a daily basis by teachers, of each student's school attendance and recorded in the roll books provided a source of information for exploration and examination. It was felt that by exploring this material it would be possible to identify patterns and trends in school absenteeism and to show that there "is an order, a regularity, obscure though it may be, that underlies an apparent disorder, thus rendering it meaningful" Shulman (1997, pp. 3-29).

Protocols

The first step was to identify possible school sites and gain access to the roll books by adhering to strict protocols. Acquiring permission to access and transcribe the details from the roll books was done in a careful and meticulous way so as to minimize any possible breach of ethical considerations or contamination of the findings. This planned approach began with the initial contact with the schools. At the point of preliminary contact I had an open mind as to where this stage might lead and about how I might proceed to the next stage and this is reflected in the documentation supplied to the schools. Letters were provided to the Boards of Management of both schools (Appendix A) requesting permission, in plain English, to meet with the Principal in relation to the initial data collection. This letter outlined the objectives of the study and gave details of the credentials of the investigator. A favourable response was received from both Principals who also shared a concern about absenteeism in their particular schools and welcomed the opportunity to be involved in the study.

Subsequent to gaining permission I arranged to meet the Principals in their respective offices where I further clarified the objectives of the study. Fortunately they both gave immediate permission to proceed and they suggested that I should photocopy the roll books rather than copy the information by hand on to spreadsheets. This suggestion was gratefully received as it immediately limited the amount of time required and thereby any possible intrusion into the life of the school. I also made it very clear, at this point, that all identifying details would be treated with the utmost confidentiality and care. The Principals explained that I would obtain

attendance information corresponding to all the students that attended these schools during 2006/07. Suitable days were identified for me to visit each school and photocopy the roll book entries for the school year September 2006 to June 2007. The rationale for choosing this time period was that the records for 2006/07 would provide a comprehensive snap shot of a full year's attendance and that otherwise I would have to wait until after September 2008 if I wanted to get the data for year 2007/08. Both Principals reassured me that selecting any of the recent years would provide the picture of absenteeism that I sought.

Prior to the holidays in June 2008, I returned to the schools and copied the roll book information on the students from the junior and senior primary schools, in all 16 classes. This provided details on school attendance in relation to 16 mixed-gender classes, two at each grade, ranging from the junior infant grade to sixth grade and encompassing all pupils at primary school level. It is worth noting that although the vertical classes in the Irish Education Primary sector are normally referred to as classes I use grades for the purpose of distinguishing classes at each grade.

Sample Selection and Documentation

Having acquired the explicit information details it was then essential to identify mechanisms by which to transfer the data onto a suitable computer software package so that the figures could be utilised. Microsoft Office Excel 2007 was deemed suitable for this purpose as the cells are organised in rows and columns, and contain data or formulas with relative or absolute references to other cells. The software also allows intelligent cell computation, where only cells dependent on the cell being modified are updated. This ensured that the figures could be cross-referenced and

double checked as required. The initial data included reference for each student, gender and grade, teacher one or two, roll book reference, date of commencing school in that year and each student's date of birth. This was followed by a variable indicating attendance on each day of the school year by each student (1 for present and 0 for absent). The following table illustrates, in miniature form, the appearance of the spread sheet following data inputting.

Table 1

Data from the Roll Books Captured on a Spreadsheet

Seq No	Name	Grade	Teacher	Start Date	DOB	Roll No	Gender	Pupil Class	September (Friday 1st - Friday 8th)					
									Fri	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri
		JI	2	01/09/06	19/04/02		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
		JI	2	01/09/06	19/02/02		1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
		JI	2	01/09/06	12/07/01		1	3	0	0	0	1	1	1
		JI	2	01/09/06	11/10/01		1	4	1	1	1	1	1	1
		JI	2	01/09/06	13/04/02		1	5	1	1	1	1	1	1
		JI	2	01/09/06	01/04/02		1	6	1	1	1	1	1	1
		SI	3	01/09/06	20/06/01		2	11	1	1	1	1	1	1
		SI	3	01/09/06	27/09/00		2	12	1	1	1	1	1	1
		SI	3	01/09/06	14/04/01		2	13	1	1	1	1	1	1
		SI	3	01/09/06	04/09/01		2	14	1	1	1	1	1	1
		SI	3	01/09/06	31/10/00		2	15	1	1	1	1	1	1
		SI	3	01/09/06	11/08/01		2	16	1	1	1	1	0	0

Note. This is a mock-up spreadsheet with all indentifying data deleted to ensure confidentiality.
In the gender column 1 denotes a boy and 2 a girl.

Obtaining the data as described was quite straightforward as the spreadsheet mirrors the format provided in the roll books. In relation to gender this was differentiated numerically as in the roll book all the boys' names are entered first, followed by the names of the girls. The teachers were assigned a number also to ensure that accuracy would be maintained while comparing between classes at grade level. This process allowed the examination of the attendance pattern of 318 students over an entire school year. The analysis of the quantitative data provided both descriptive and inferential numeric analysis which allowed careful checking and cross-checking to ensure the validity of the data. One of the benefits of the sequential approach, according to Creswell (2003), is that "analyses of quantitative data in the first place can yield extreme or outlier cases" (p. 221). As mentioned above in relation to selecting the relevant sample it was essential to remove information on the students that did not fit the selection criteria for this study and thereby create the actual study sample.

Examining the data to identify what would become the actual sample (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998) involved referring to the research question and being true to the investigation in hand. It was clear that in order to examine the patterns of attendance it was essential that the students had to be actively enrolled in the schools. This meant that a minimum number of days in attendance had to be decided so that any systematic errors could be considered and disregarded from this study (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997). The principle behind this activity was to ensure that students whose names may be on the roll books but who didn't attend at these schools for a minimum number of days would not jeopardize the validity of any inferences arising

from the study (Rosnow & Rosenthal). Being absolutely clear that the research was aiming to add to information about students in relation to their patterns of attendance meant that it was essential to focus on a credible cohort of sample students.

Once all the details for the 318 students were inputted onto the spreadsheet it was possible to decide on the selection criteria (the minimum number of days that a student would have to be in attendance at a particular school in order to satisfy the validity conditions of the sample). Students not attending school for a minimum period of time (23 days), during the school year, were removed from the sample. Luckily the number of students (12) that did not attend for the minimum number of days (23) was relatively small and still left a sizable and relevant sample (306). It became clear that the attendance at school by each of these 12 students over the entire year ranged between 0-23 days, with the average attendance being 9 days. The extreme percentage of absence for these students showed that 3 students had no absent days (out of total of 23 days attendance), 3 students were not present at all and the remaining 6 students were within the range of between 60% and 99.2% absenteeism. The data in Table 2 explains these figures and supports the removal of the 12 students from the sample and how the data might otherwise be skewed and might not provide a fair representation of the patterns of attendance.

Table 2

Details of 12 Students Excluded from the Sample Selection

Number	Grade	Teacher	Beg date	Gender	Days Pres	Days Abs	% Abs
38	JI	2		1	6	9	60.0
116	1st	6	17/10/06	2	2	19	90.5
150	2nd	8	16/11/06	1	1	125	99.2
162	3rd	9	01/09/06	1	7	0	0.0
172	3rd	9	01/09/06	2	21	0	0.0
273	5th	14	01/09/06	2	21	0	0.0
275	5th	14	16/10/06	2	23	86	78.9
285	6th	15	01/09/06	1	0	6	100.0
287	6th	15	01/09/06	1	0	140	100.0
288	6th	15	16/10/06	1	23	86	78.9
296	6th	15	01/09/06	2	3	137	97.9
297	6th	15	01/09/06	2	0	11	100.0

Note. In the gender column 1 denotes a boy and 2 a girl.

As can be seen from the details in the table these students were not in attendance at either school for a sufficient number of days (23 days or less) to allow them to be classified as being truly enrolled at the school. The average number of days attended by this group was 9 with the range being from 0 days present to 23 days present. If these students were not removed from the sample the percentage of absenteeism would have been skewed and would have distorted any potential learning from the study. There can be no doubt that there could be a lot of learning in relation to the circumstances of these 12 students that would inform our knowledge of absenteeism. This needs to be addressed and includes the failure of schools to inform each other immediately when a student is enrolled. However, for this study it would be unhelpful to treat these students in the same manner as other students

enrolled in the schools. This process of sample selection resulted in baseline data being available in relation to the attendance of 306 students across one year of primary school, offering a valid sized sample.

Data Analysis

The next step was to identify the baseline data arising from the figures which gave findings regarding information on the children in each of the 16 classes, including numbers in each class at each grade. The sort function available in Microsoft Excel allowed the identification of the variables that needed to be isolated and this was used for the baseline and absenteeism data. Sorting the baseline data identified the numbers in each class and grade according to gender. Having established what children were in each class and at each grade it was then possible to identify figures pertaining to the days absent and map out the attendance pattern throughout the school year. This meant the emergence of information pertaining to student's gender, grade, and related patterns of absenteeism on certain days of the week and at specific times of the year.

In order to obtain figures in relation to absenteeism a mathematical formula was applied to the numeric analysis. The total percentage figures, used at all times, are summation figures. In order to obtain percentage figures, which form the basis of analysis and comparison, a mathematical formula was used to divide the number of days absent by the sum of the days present and absent and multiplied by 100. This formula is depicted numerically as follows:

$$\% \text{ absent} = \frac{\text{Days absent}}{\text{Days present} + \text{Days absent}} \times 100$$

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This formula was used throughout the absenteeism data analysis in Phase 1 providing a straightforward mechanism for accuracy and cross checking. As will be explained in Chapter 5 the main findings from this first quantitative phase provided the basis for the questions asked during the subsequent phase. Thus the findings from Phase 1 provided the basis for statistical and text analysis as required in mixed methods approach.

Phase 2: Qualitative Method, Data Collection and Data Analysis

Qualitative Method

The objective of Phase 2 was to check out, build upon and add meaning to the findings from the quantitative phase. Hammersley (2002) refers to applied research as being "of a more practical approach and (is) often referred to as the qualitative method" (p. 117). Qualitative researchers follow a nonlinear path and emphasise becoming intimate with the details of a natural setting or a particular cultural-historical context. They use fewer standardised procedures and conduct detailed investigations of particular cases or processes in their search for authenticity. The strengths of using this method at this point concur with many of those outlined by Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) and the primary relevant strengths for this study include:

- Understanding and description of people's personal experience of phenomena;
- Can describe, in rich detail, phenomena as they are situated and embedded in local contexts;
- Data are usually collected in naturalistic settings in qualitative research;

- Qualitative approaches are responsive to local situations, conditions and stakeholders' needs. (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 20)

The theoretical assumptions underpinning qualitative methods differ from those of quantitative methods and warrant a mention here. The qualitative method is *fundamentally interpretative* allowing the researcher to interpret the data (Creswell, 2003). This viewpoint is shared with Rubin and Rubin (2004) who refer to interpretative constructionist philosophy as the theoretical foundation for qualitative research. While quantitative analysis must provide internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity, likewise a qualitative study must provide for credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Robson, 1993; Sugrue, 1997). The collective concept for these principles is described as *trustworthiness* by Lincoln and Guba. This concept (further explained in the section on the pilot interview) provided assurance in relation to the instruments applied in Phase 2.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Selection of Research Informants

The analysis from Phase 1 confirmed that poor attendance was an issue for some children attending these schools. The next research task was to identify an appropriate method by which to confirm and build on these findings and thereby fulfil the primary objective of Phase 2. As the study focused on the patterns of attendance of all students enrolled in these schools it was deemed important to interview key personnel with responsibility for attendance, working both in school

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and in related services, as they were best placed to interpret the overall figures from the roll books. A further rationale for this decision was the potential to add knowledge in relation to the implementation of intervention and prevention strategies.

The omission of the voice of the students and their parents' warrants mention here, particularly, given the emphasis in this thesis on equality and the belief of the author that participation of families living in marginalised circumstances in research projects, such as this, is vitally important. However, the nature and scope of this research project, exploring the extent and nature of poor attendance and engagement at primary school level through the analysis of roll book data and the views and experience of key professionals engaged in this area, did not permit the inclusion of this further piece of research. Such a project could add enormously to the research findings of this study, offering an invaluable perspective and assisting further triangulation; this researcher would wish to build on this research with this additional investigation at a later time.

It was apparent that the findings from Phase 1 could benefit from additional information based on the views and perceptions of the key professional people that interact with school absenteeism on a daily basis. Having decided on the focus of Phase 2, the criteria for actual interviewee selection was then agreed. This is outlined in the section on protocols for participant selection and interview procedure.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The use of semi-structured interviews was the approach deemed to be most suitable. The aim was to elicit high-quality responses through developing research

instruments that are participant-friendly and research-appropriate. This implied

understanding the interview process and the difference between a conversation and a

planned interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). The latter implies consent to be recorded

and for the material produced to be utilised for research purposes. The agreement to

be interviewed also implies a willingness to cooperate with the researchers' agenda

and her or his control of the proceedings and direction of the interview (Denscombe,

2003).

The rationale behind conducting the interviews was based on the

acknowledgment that interviews within research can provide valuable information

based on people's experiences and can be more beneficial than other instruments

such as questionnaires when discussing multidimensional issues. Denscombe's

(2003) view, that "as an information-gathering tool, the interview lends itself to

being used alongside other methods as a way of supplementing their data – adding

detail and depth" (p. 166), strongly supports that rationale. Adding detail and depth

to the information gleaned from the roll books is one of the study's objectives and is

in line with the sequential explanatory design adopted. The use of open-ended

questions (ones that are not easily answered with a yes or no response) invited the

interviewee to participate in the conversation and ensured that they did not answer

discreetly (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) but provided rich material. The semi-

structured interviews contained a clear list (21) of similar questions to be answered in

a flexible way with the intention that the interviewee would speak more widely on

the issues raised (Bernard & Ryan, 2009). The primary function of these interviews

was to illicit open-ended answers allowing the interviewee to place emphasis and elaborate on certain points of interest (Denscombe, 2003).

The one-to-one nature of these interviews also allowed for more easily managed situations by locating quite straightforwardly specific ideas with specific people. The interviews sought to obtain expansive information on the topic and applied a responsive interview technique as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2004). The characteristics of this technique include the dynamic and iterative process, which was very useful in a study such as this as it is "about obtaining interviewees' experience and understanding of the world they work in" (Rubin & Rubin, 2004, p. 36). In addition to asking similar questions the techniques used included guiding and probing questions (Bernard & Ryan, 2009). This allowed for follow-up questions, thereby obtaining further relevant information (Appendix D).

Prior to conducting the interviews it was important to ensure that the correct questions were being included and that they fitted the primary purpose of Phase 2. The focus was to gather information on absenteeism which would augment the findings from the roll book investigation. The method was applied in a way as to ensure *trustworthiness* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and was established through a detailed pilot of the interview questions. In addition, the considerable number of questions included in the interview guide served to increase its trustworthiness. The functions of the pilot interview included the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the schedule of questions so that these could be adjusted and improved accordingly.

Pilot Interview

Once the decision was made to conduct interviews with a number of

individuals, a pilot interview took place in March 2009 and was an essential step in

planning and maximising the benefit of Phase 2 of the study. The primary aim of the

pilot interview was to ensure that there were no anomalies in participants'

understanding and that the questions were clear, user-friendly and succinct, in order

to stimulate a response and to obtain the information required. Upon consideration of

a suitable person to select as the pilot interviewee I asked a former colleague of mine

(working as an Educational Welfare Officer, at the time of contact) to undergo the

pilot interview. My rationale for this selection included my confidence in his

understanding of the research area and a respect for his knowledge and expertise and

commitment to tackling educational disadvantage. The portraiture of the

interviewees is outlined in detail in Appendix B. This provides a formal statement of

the roles and responsibilities, beginning with the EWO (refers to the pilot

interviewee and the other EWO interviewed) and includes the informal statement of

background provided during the interview.

The interview was held in Seán's home and took approximately an hour and a

half. The responses to the questions were recorded on a tape recorder and

supplemented by field notes. Much learning was derived from repetitive listening,

transcription and reviewing of the interview recording and notes. A reflective note

was prepared and subsequently discussed with my supervisors. This led to the

amendment of the initial set of questions and revised headings and questions

provided a sharper focus to the enquiry (Appendix E). Even though the interview

was conducted as a pilot the findings highlighted a number of important issues in relation to absenteeism which also add to the overall results. Having successfully completed the data analysis of Phase 1 and the pilot interview the principles required to ensure *trustworthiness* of the subsequent semi-structured interviews became clear and began with the identification of relevant key personnel.

Protocols for Participant Selection and Interview Procedure

All of those selected as interviewees had a statutory role in preventing and monitoring school absenteeism. Their statutory responsibilities included the implementation of the legislation (EWA, 2000) that aims to stem the tide of absenteeism. One of the cross-cutting themes clearly outlined in the legislation is the requirement for a partnership approach between schools and a range of statutory agencies. Discussing the outcomes from Phase 1 and obtaining further perceptions and attitudes of these personnel in relation to absenteeism at primary level was seen, as a valid endeavour, by me at this stage of the study, and one that could add to the knowledge already in existence. As I was interested in absenteeism in the context of a geographical area designated as disadvantaged, as this proffered the possibility that the results might be generalisable to other similar urban settings (with schools of similar type), all of the selected interviewees had a role with the specific schools involved in Phase 1.

The selection process involved identifying the main professional people that were in contact with the issue of absenteeism on a daily basis within these schools. The School Principals were chosen because they had direct responsibility for the students and for the returns to NEWB. During the data collection in Phase 1 both

Principals agreed to be interviewed, if required. They also steered me towards the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator, based in the Senior School but with responsibilities relating to both schools. The Principal of the Senior School asked the HSCL Coordinator if he would agree to be interviewed. The other four personnel were selected as they were associated with the School Completion Programme, Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers and the National Educational Welfare Board. It was also important that the selected interviewees were knowledgeable and experienced as otherwise I would not get the rich responses that I was seeking (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Obtaining a variety of perspectives through the involvement of a number of agencies added depth to the investigation. All the interviewees and agencies involved satisfied the selection criteria for this study.

Having obtained the contact details for each of the support personnel, from the School Principals, I subsequently phoned each one and asked them to take part in this study. I then sent them a statement of explanation about the study (Appendix C) which included assurances of confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability and an opt-out clause which invited them to only participate if they were happy with the outline given. The one-to-one interviews were pre-arranged and conducted either in the schools or specific offices in the locality. Prior to the allotted interview time all interviewees received a schedule of the questions to be covered in the interview (Appendix D). All those approached to participate were willing to be interviewed. The average length of interview was one hour. At the beginning of each interview I asked for permission to record the interview and to take written notes. Each interview was taped using a small, unobtrusive recorder and additional written notes

were taken to augment the transcription. I reiterated on several occasions that all names would be changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the people, schools and geographical location. Detailed information on these key intervention agencies is outlined previously in the policy chapter. The main roles and responsibilities are included in the portraitures of the interviewees (Appendix B) as part of the backdrop to the context for each interview.

Portraiture of the Interviewees

The intention behind providing background particulars of the interviewees (Appendix B) is that this information will add to the contextual detail and strengthen the rationale behind the sample selection. This information includes formal and informal particulars about each interviewee, similar to that provided in the case of the pilot interview. The formal information includes the official job description as prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills and the informal was information obtained at interview stage. Abbreviations are applied and are outlined in Table 3. These include the relevant abbreviations of the titles of all seven interviewees, (including the person interviewed for the pilot).

Table 3

Abbreviations for each interviewee

EWO 1– Educational Welfare Officer - Jason
PJS – Principal of the Junior School - Patricia
PSS – Principal of the Senior School- Ciarán
HSCL Coordinator – Home School Community Liaison Coordinator - Tony
SCP Local Coordinator – Local School Completion Programme Coordinator - Maria
VTT – Visiting Teacher for Travellers - Suzanne
EWO 2 Pilot - Educational Welfare Officer interviewed for the pilot interview-Seán

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

Having conducted the remaining six interviews I now had the raw data in the

form of audio recordings (Bernard & Ryan, 2009). According to Gray (2009), the use

of tape recordings allow the researcher to "concentrate on the process of listening,

interpreting and refocusing the interview" (p. 385). The next step was to listen over

and over again "to (get) feel for context and nuances they contain [and] then

transcribe and analyze thematically" (Bernard & Ryan, 2009, p. 48). Then it was

time to undertake what Bernard and Ryan (2009) term to be one of the most

fundamental tasks in qualitative research in the form of theme identification. The

techniques used included transcription which involved typing up the text while

listening to it and thereby achieve immersion in the research topic.

Analysing texts relies heavily on discovering themes and subthemes,

describing core and peripheral elements in themes, applying themes, and attaching

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themes to chunks of text (Crowley & Delfico, 1996). Themes are described in many different ways by researchers including expressions, units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and coding (Crowley & Delfico, 1996). I agree with Bernard and Ryan when they explain that themes come from characteristics of the topic being studied and that they are induced from the text. The tools used for this were simple and straightforward and are referred to as pawing and marking up or cutting and sorting (Bernard & Ryan, 2009). Once all the interviews were transcribed and listened to the text was printed off in hard copy. Themes were coded, linked with the questions and subthemes were identified. Following the highlighting of these I then tabulated the text using Microsoft Excel (Crowley & Delfico, 1996). This procedure allowed me to cut and paste the relevant text under the correct themes and subthemes. Bernard (2000) refers to this technique as eyeballing by way of hunting for patterns. This was an iterative process and with continuous refining worked very well and eventually provided the themes and headings required for presentation of the findings in Chapter 5.

Ethical Considerations

Concern for ethics in both the planning and execution of research is essential to ensure high standards in the quality of any study. O'Leary (2005) defined ethical behaviour as conforming to standards of conduct of a given profession or group. As outlined by Gray (2009), all research involving human behaviour implies that ethical issues may impact at every stage including the "planning, implementation and reporting stages" (p. 68). Gray describes ethics in research as ensuring that the research is conducted in a responsible and morally defensible way. In order to uphold

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these standards, I undertook to conform to the best research practice and to endeavour to ensure that the rights and well-being of those involved were not negatively impacted upon. The Research Ethics Committee of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra gave approval for the study. This involved the submission of the research proposal, all research instruments and letters seeking access and consent. I was guided by four ethical principles provided by Gray (2009), including;

- Avoid harming the participants

- Ensure informed consent of participants

- Respect the privacy of participants

- Avoid the use of deception. (p.79)

Establishing trust between the researcher and the research participants is essential. I undertook to give importance at all times to "self-reflection, and self awareness" in relation to the ethical considerations (Neuman, 2000). By being aware and very grateful for the cooperation and willingness I received from all those that I approached I was mindful of the need to respect the trust placed in me and to uphold the high standards as set out above. It was clear that this trust was forthcoming due to my record working previously in the same geographical area and being known as an advocate for those with whom I had worked. Fortunately this prior knowledge meant that all the participants understood that every effort would be made to safeguard the rights of participants and to protect the dignity of all those studied in the presentation of the research findings (Galvin, Higgins & Mahony, 2009).

The principle of informed consent ensured that participants were, at all times, given clear information outlining the purpose of the study, the process involved and their right to withdraw at any time. The standards applied to protect the privacy of research participants include confidentiality whereby they are assured that identifying information will not be made available to any person not directly involved in the study. Anonymity, which essentially means that the participant will remain anonymous throughout the study, especially at the write up and dissemination stages, was assured at all times (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2000; Neuman, 2000). The matter of privacy was essential and also ensured participants of the protection of the schools and students involved in the study.

Ethical obligations arose at each stage of the research process and thereby needed specific attention. In Phase 1, obtaining the data regarding students' attendance throughout a school year meant that this information had to be rendered anonymous and kept safe for research purposes only. Students were given numbers so that the information could be extracted without any further disclosure of their identity. A commitment was made to ensure all the original data would be kept safe until such time as it was no longer required for research purposes. In relation to the interviewees all information identifying them was also rendered anonymous. A clear commitment was made to the interviewees to report accurately and fairly and to keep any promises made (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This included a commitment to accuracy and consistency at the report writing stage, ensuring that no fabrication takes place (Gray, 2009). Awareness of these ethical issues is essential for the practitioner researcher and was considered very carefully at all times in an effort to avoid any

potential uncertainties or misgivings that may arise from either side. The self-reflexive requirement under ethical considerations was also useful in the acknowledgement of the limitations of this research.

Limitations of this Investigation

The design applied to the study has a number of limitations and constraints, some of which are outlined by focusing separately on each phase. However, the overall constraints of this study also need mentioning. A primary limitation is the narrow scope of this case study as carried out in Phase 1 and Phase 2. Firstly, the focus on figures from only one academic year inevitably lessens the potential of the identification of possible patterns. However, it is anticipated that the findings from this study can be generally applied to other comparable situations as the overall figures for absenteeism are similar to other schools in urban areas designated as disadvantaged.

Secondly, a notable constraint derives from limiting the interviews to professional personnel only and thereby excluding the views of the students and their parents. The decision to limit the research to professional personnel was determined by the focus of the study, on the patterns of absenteeism and the implementation of relevant legislation. Attention was given to the justification of the interviewee selection process and the consequent omission of the voice of students and their parents.

Another overall limitation that warrants discussion is related to the application of the mixed methods approach. Many authors provide advice and direction in relation to possible problems of integrating and interpreting mixed methods (Burke

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Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Denscombe, 2003; Gray, 2009). These problems include issues of priority, integration, paradigm fit and trustworthiness. The mitigation of these concerns was tackled by applying the *confirmability audit* as explained earlier. The equal prioritisation given to the qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis also lessened any possible imbalance that might arise within the study. Acknowledging that this is a mixed methods research project attention is given to the validity of the quantitative research and to the credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 p. 219) of the qualitative research.

Limitations Applying to Phase 1

The straightforward nature of the information in the roll books meant that there was little prospect of the data becoming too technical and resulting in an "overbearing concern with the technical aspects of analysis" (Denscombe, 2003, p. 264). Adherence to selection criteria for the actual sample meant that the rationale was clear and justified in relation to the removal of details pertaining to some students. This resulted in the ability to gain a clear picture in relation to the patterns of absenteeism of a sizeable number of students attending primary school.

Limitations Applying to Phase 2

Even though there are many advantages to the interview process, some limitations include the creation of the process and the dependence on the skills and experience of the interviewer and the honesty of the answers. The centrality of the researcher as the primary instrument in conducting interviews is outlined by several authors (Creswell, 2003; Frankel & Wallen 1990; Lincoln & Guba 1985; Robson

1993). The use of this human instrument implies the need to ensure that the interview or the *conversation with a purpose* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) reflected the aims of the inquiry. The use of the responsive interview technique as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2004) ensured that the questions were appropriate and gleaned the information sought. Qualitative research is regularly criticised for being overly interpretative and thereby subjective. The use of judgment in coding is subjective as described by Crowley and Delfico (1996). However, the use of the simple and straightforward tools, referred to as pawing and marking up or cutting and sorting (Bernard & Ryan, 2009) resulted in continual narrowing and focusing so that the outcome was a genuine reflection of the issues discussed.

I hope I have demonstrated that, even though the research might be deemed to be narrow in scope, through the mixed methods approach applied and the deliberately focused research design the findings can make a valuable contribution to existing knowledge on absenteeism at primary school level.

CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION of RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter begins by providing some information about the participants. The reader will then be guided through a sequenced presentation of the findings from Phase 1 to Phase 2. In Chapter 6, analysis of these findings identifies the commonalities and differences arising between the two phases of data collection.

The two primary schools are similar to the vast majority of first level schools in the Irish education system in that they are governed by Boards of Management under the patronage of the Catholic Church. The main funding for the schools is provided by the DES by way of capitation grants and teacher salaries. This research takes place in a junior primary school and a senior primary school (referred to as one school, for research purposes). Such schools are normally referred to as split schools. In the present case, children attend the junior school until the completion of second grade. They then proceed to third grade, in the adjoining senior school or less often to another school, remaining there until the end of sixth grade, after which they transfer to post-primary school. Both of these schools comprise of two classes at each grade; eight classes in each school.

The schools are geographically located beside each other but are managed and operated as independent entities. The schools were built approximately 33 years ago and were designed to meet the needs of a large urban population. In the 1980s and 1990s these schools were populated with children from nearby public housing estates with classes of about 40 being the norm. As the families of the neighbourhood matured the school's population decreased substantially. There are many possible

explanations for the decrease in school numbers including the effects of demographic changes on urban communities. The other possible influencing factor, of interest to this study, is that these schools were designated as disadvantaged by the DES and were consequently beneficiaries of programmes such as Early Start Pilot Programme (1994), Breaking the Cycle (1996), and DEIS (DES, 2005). The average class size in both schools in 2006/2007 was 19 pupils, almost 50% less than in the 1980s. The schools are co-educational with much more boys than girls in attendance. An explanation for this gender enrolment difference is the high number of all-girl primary schools in close proximity to these schools. Parents in the area often choose to send their daughters to one of the other available schools.

The physical characteristics of the schools have also been transformed recently due to the investment of funding to improve, repair and modernise both schools. This has resulted in bright, spacious and heated interiors. The outdoor areas are very large with separated areas for car parking and outdoor play. Both schools are surrounded by high railings which were put in place in the early 1990s as a response to the school buildings being vandalised regularly. I was very familiar with both schools up to 20 years ago and it is worth noting my overall impression when I returned to undertake this study. The decline in the number of children enrolled in the schools and the increase in the auxiliary staff employed in both schools were very apparent. The atmosphere was friendly and almost homely, particularly in the junior school. This gave me an overall impression that the physical environment of these schools had benefitted from the investment by the DES over the past decade.

Phase 1: Data from the Roll Books

The data collected provides information on 306 pupils attending these schools

in 2006/2007 and their pattern of attendance under the headings of student's grade

and gender and periods of absence such as the day of the week and time of the year.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the findings from the roll book data are presented as if

the school is one entity, even though the schools were physically located in adjacent

buildings. This makes it easier to see the patterns and trends across the spectrum of

all primary school grades over the entire school year. As explained in the previous

chapter, the levels within Irish primary schools are usually referred to as classes such

as 2nd class, 3rd class etc. rather than grades; however, as this study refers to two

classroom units at each grade I apply the term grades to aid comprehension.

Baseline Figures 2006-2007

Each school had two classes at each grade which provided data pertaining to 16

teachers and 16 classes in total. The initial baseline information provided the

breakdown of the number of students in each class and each grade. This was

subsequently broken down to the number of boys and girls in each class and at each

grade. The sample for this study was 306 students: 154 from the junior school and

152 from the senior school. The information applies to students throughout the

primary school spectrum and the fact that they were in spilt schools doesn't affect the

figures for the 306 students. The aim here is to provide the information on the data

from the roll books in a clear and logical manner and to span the continuum of a

primary school. Table 4 shows the number in each class at each grade level (JI and SI refer to the infant grades, junior and senior).

Table 4

Students in each class at each grade

Class	JI	SI	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Total
1	24	16	18	21	17	21	20	16	
2	22	17	17	19	21	19	17	21	
Total	46	33	35	40	38	40	37	37	306

The number of students in each class was relatively small and evenly spread. The largest class size was 24 (one class with this number) and the smallest class size was 16 (two classes of this size) and all others were within this range. The average number of students in each class was 19. There were 119 girls and 187 boys in the sample and these were spread evenly between all grades.

Table 5

Gender breakdown in each class at each grade

	JI	SI	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Total
Boys	29	21	18	27	22	28	20	22	187
Girls	17	12	17	13	16	12	17	15	119
Total	46	33	35	40	38	40	37	37	306

Absenteeism Figures: Grade and Gender

The percentage of absenteeism for the students in these schools for the year 2006 - 2007 was 10.2%. As explained in Chapter 4, a mathematical formula was used throughout the data analysis to obtain percentage figures thereby ensuring accuracy through regular and straightforward cross-checking.

Table 6

Percentage of Absenteeism

	No	Days pres	Days abs	Per (%) abs
Boys	187	28,357	3,286	10.4
Girls	119	19,204	2,137	10.0
Total	306	47,561	5,423	10.2

The highest percentage of absenteeism was in the infant grades at 12.2% for students in junior infants and 11.8% for students in senior infants. The lowest rate of absenteeism among all grade levels was 1st at 8%. Levels increase again in 2nd to 10% and fluctuated about this figure for the remaining grades.

Table 7

Percentage of Absenteeism – Grades and Gender

	JI	SI	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Total %
Boys	11.9	11.5	8.5	9.2	8.8	10.3	11.5	10.9	10.3
Girls	12.4	12.1	7.7	10.6	8.8	10.1	10.2	8.8	10.1
Total	12.2	11.8	8.1	9.9	8.8	10.2	10.9	9.9	10.2

This is also represented in graphic format:

Grade Level (Junior Infants to Sixth Class)
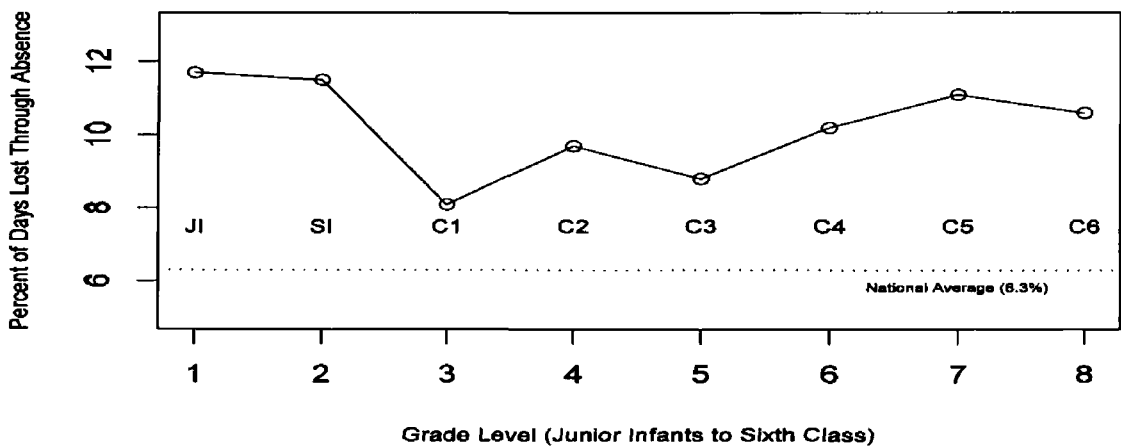
The overall percentage of absenteeism was comparable between boys and girls. As indicated, the breakdown by gender and the percentage of absenteeism was fairly similar between boys and girls throughout most of the grades with absenteeism being exactly the same for both boys and girls at two grade levels (3rd and 4th). The largest differences between the girls and boys can be seen only at 6th grade (2.1%) where the girls were absent by 2% more than the boys. The percentage of absenteeism for both

genders is very high in both the junior and senior infant grade (12.2%, 11.8%) and this also represents the highest rate of absenteeism among all grades, as stated above.

When looking more closely at the classes at each grade it is possible to see that the pattern remained similar for both boys and girls in most classes. However, where a difference between classes emerged it is a striking difference. In junior infants the percentage of absenteeism of girls is 17. 5% in one class and 7.2% in the other. At 2nd grade the absenteeism for girls in one class is 7.5% and 13.6% in the other. Similarly at 6th grade it is 5.6% in one class and 12% in the other for girls. In relation to the boys it is only at 6th grade that the difference between the classes is large at 6.1% and 15.7%. When combining both the girls and the boys in each class it is only one grade (6th) that has a marked difference between the percentage of absenteeism for boys and girls. Class 2 has very high rates of absenteeism for both genders (12% for girls and 15.7% for boys). Upon further investigation of these differences it is probable that they are caused by extremely high absenteeism of a few of the students in a particular class.

Table 8

Percentage of Absenteeism by Gender and Class Unit

		JI	SI	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Total %
Boys	Class 1	12.1	10.9	8.1	9.3	8	11	11.6	6.1	
	Class 2	11.7	12	8.9	9.1	9	10	11.3	15.7	
	Total	11.9	11.5	8.5	9.2	8.8	10	11.5	10.9	10.3
Girls	Class 1	17.5	12.5	7.6	7.5	8	10	12.5	5.6	
	Class 2	7.2	11.7	7.7	13.6	9	11	7.8	12	
	Total	12.4	12.1	7.7	10.6	9	10	10.2	8.8	10.1

In addition to providing the baseline numbers and the figures for absenteeism for the students at each grade, gender and for each class, the roll book information also allowed examination of the patterns of absenteeism over the days of the week and times of the year.

Absenteeism Figures: Days of the Week and Months of the Year

The spreadsheet followed the school calendar year for 2006/2007 and indicated the school open and closed periods. It also provided data in relation to the patterns of absenteeism over the weekdays and throughout the school year. Table 9 gives the percentage of absenteeism for each day of the week with the highest percentage of absenteeism on Fridays at 14.5%, followed by Mondays at 11.2%. It is fairly consistent for the remaining three days at 8.5%.

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Table 9

Absenteeism and Days of the Week

Day	Pres	Abs	Total (%) Abs
Monday	9,378	1,184	11.2
Tuesday	9,762	895	8.4
Wednesday	9,696	873	8.3
Thursday	9,777	943	8.8
Friday	9,038	1,528	14.5
Total	47,651	5,423	10.2

The pattern over the school-year span shows that the percentage of absenteeism rises continuously between September (6.7%) to June (15.5%). Table 10 also shows other significant increases at some holiday periods such as Christmas.

Table 10

Absenteeism and Months of the Year

Month	Pres	Abs	(%) Abs
September	5,900	425	6.7
October	5,875	455	7.2
November	4,410	426	8.8
December	4,223	598	12.4
January	4,654	480	9.3
February	4,770	648	12.0
March	5,483	563	9.3
April	3,009	324	9.7
May	5,151	757	12.8
June	4,086	747	15.5
Total	47,561	5,423	10.2

This is also represented in the following graph and shows the months of the year when absenteeism is significantly higher and lower than the average of 10.2%.
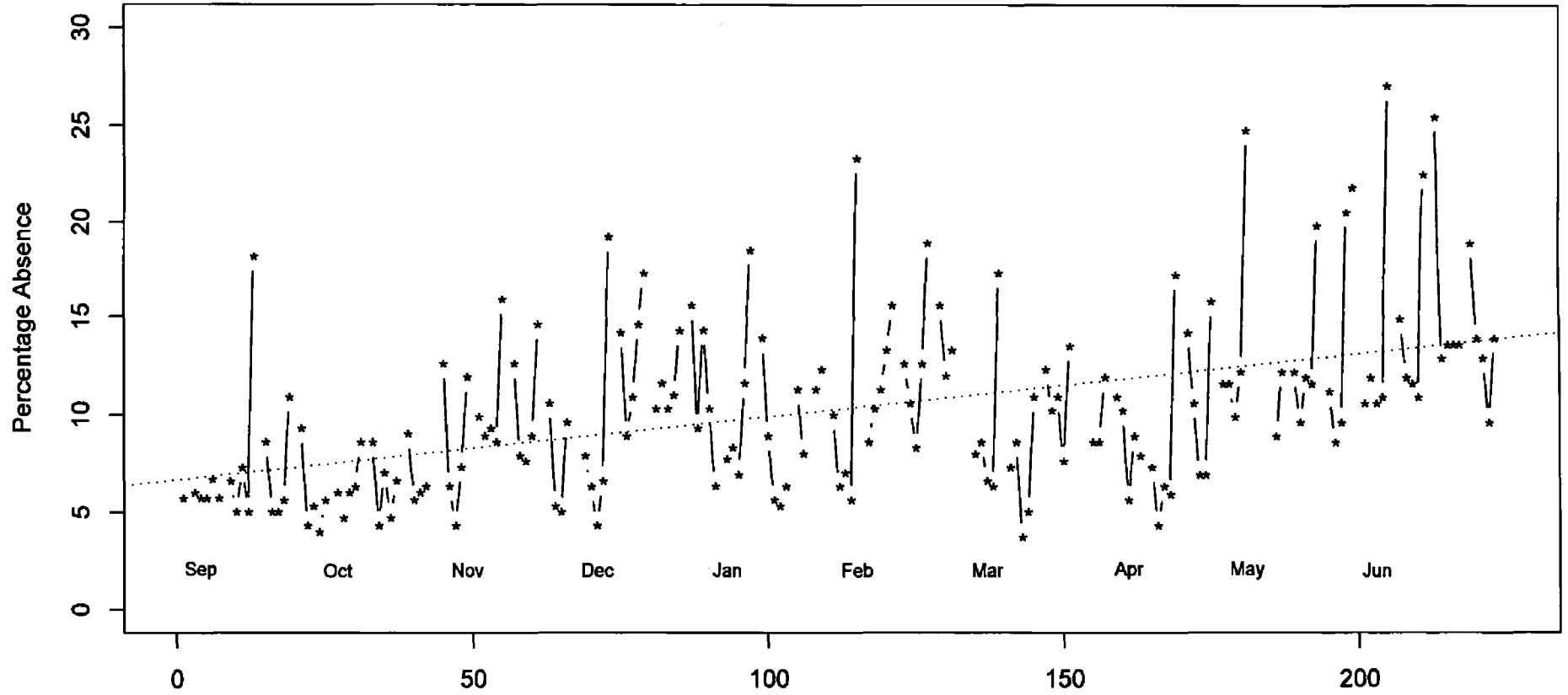
School Days (*): Friday, September 1, 2006 to Friday, June 29, 2007

These findings formed the basis for some of the questions asked in Phase 2. How they interconnect with and diverge from the interview outcomes will form part of the analysis in Chapter 6.

Phase 2 – Findings from Interviews with Key Personnel

Introduction

Building on Phase 1 and aiming to acquire further knowledge on the subject of school absenteeism at primary level, Phase 2 involved semi-structured interviews with seven people in key positions, (direct and indirect) in the schools. The instrument or interview schedule asked participants to respond, based on their experience, to a set of questions guided by key themes, identified in Phase 1, and a subsequent set of related sub-themes. The four key themes were: 1) patterns and trends in primary school absenteeism; 2) the implementation of the legislation Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000); 3) prevention and intervention strategies and 4) recommendations for future practice and policy. These broad themes were subsequently broken down into sub-themes (Table 11) and provide a mechanism for relating and analysing the data. The findings within all the themes are related to the corresponding headings in Phase 1, where applicable. The responses of the interviewees correspond generally to the information in Phase 1. They also expand on related information on absenteeism that was deemed to fit the remit of this study. This section provides a narrative under each theme and sub-theme and is interspersed with relevant quotes from the interviews, where pertinent.

Table 11

Thematic Analyses of Interview Findings

Theme 1		
	1	Baseline pupil characteristics 2006-2007
	2	Prevalence of absenteeism in the schools
Patterns and Trends	3	Absenteeism in infant grades
	4	Absenteeism in grades 1st to 6th
	5	Absenteeism and gender
	6	Absenteeism and periods of time

Theme 2		
Legislation (Education Welfare Act 2000)	1	Twenty days - indicator of a problem
	2	School returns to NEWB

Theme 3		
Prevention and Intervention Strategies	1	School Attendance Monitors
	2	Reward systems and related activities
	3	Inter-agency collaboration

Theme 4		
Recommendations for Future Practice and Policy	1	Reform of the data collection systems
	2	Parents' accountability and incentives
	3	Information and promotion of school attendance

All of the personnel interviewed indicated that they shared a key principle underpinning this thesis: that it is essential for young children to attend primary school regularly in order to increase their life chances and opportunities. This principle provided the overall backdrop to the interviews. A primary objective of all those interviewed was to stem the tide of poor school attendance and prevent the

development of a self-perpetuating cycle. One of the overriding sentiments emerging from the interviews was the importance of attention to detail in relation to the narrative of each individual child's absenteeism. It was generally agreed that overall figures and statistics, such as the quantitative outcomes of Phase 1, may indicate trends but provide very little understanding of what is really happening to each individual child absent from school. The aim of Phase 2 is to provide qualitative data through interviews with key educational personnel to augment the objective findings from Phase 1. There was general recognition, as stated earlier, that out of the cohort of seven interviewees, four were less focused on primary school absenteeism due to their broader remit. However, having acknowledged this constraint, all those interviewed had much to relate on the themes under which the interview was conducted in relation to the primary school students in their care.

Theme 1: Patterns and Trends of Absenteeism

There was a general sense that many changes have taken place during the last decade within both schools. Overall student numbers have declined and pupil-teacher ratios have also decreased. The Principal of the Senior School (PSS) linked these latter changes to benefits accrued to the schools through resources under the DEIS programme:

> The school was virtually rebuilt over the last four years. There's a new roof, new doors and windows, new central heating system, new electric system and the pupil teacher ratio is a lot more favourable now because we're in DEIS. (PSS)

Other demographic changes, notable in these schools during the last decade, include a decrease in the number of children from the Travelling community and an increase in the number of children from other minority ethnic groupings such as Polish and Roma communities.

Baseline Pupil Characteristics 2006-2007

While recognising the incremental developments, albeit of a different nature to the topic of this study, all of the interviewees acknowledged the high rate of absenteeism among the students and concurred with the baseline figures that were derived from the roll books. Both Principals and the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator also expressed concern about the living standards of the students and their families. All of the interviewees recognised the location of the schools as an area designated as disadvantaged. They referred particularly to the effects of social and economic deprivation and poverty and how this often manifested at family level. The lack of capacity to function as a sustainable family unit was seen to be compounded by poverty and its overt manifestations, as outlined by the PSS in relation to one girl whom he was very concerned about "[47 days is a lot to miss], and she'll be going round, that child now is going round and her hair is walking with lice". The understanding that families are trying to cope with very chaotic lives was the reason why many of the respondents felt that getting a child to school can be difficult as: "They're just very often struggling to cope with now" (HSCL Coordinator). Similar views were often used to depict scenes of social deprivation and linked to the view that within these circumstances education might

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often be low down in the list of priorities of parents who live with the reality of poverty:

> I think a lot of the time it can be stuff that's going on at home, dysfunctional families, and getting out of bed in the morning may not happen, you know it mightn't happen till 11 or 12 o'clock and it's too late to go to school then. So I think poor attendance would be linked up with disadvantage and dysfunctional families and education not being a priority, low down on the list. (Visiting Teacher for Travellers [VTT]

Where the issue of capacity was highlighted this was often linked to illness or addiction-related problems. The School Completion Coordinator (SCP Local Coordinator) emphasised the concern for children raised in families where there were addiction problems, a view shared by one of the Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs):

> Some parents are just not capable of getting themselves up in the morning, never mind getting their children up. So you get a dysfunction in the family structure. You might have illness as well actually, another factor. Parents could be ill. Family members could be ill. This could be related to alcohol or drugs as well. (EWO 1)

Many of the interviewees referred to this aforementioned broad term of dysfunction and how it is used to describe various types of problems within families. As the VTT explained, "It's very, very complex. I mean in a lot of the dysfunctional families, there are drug related problems, and alcohol related problems, a lot of anger issues so it's a very complex problem". Concern was expressed for children of lone

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parents, particularly of extremely young lone parents and those reared in families where the significant adults were often transient. As the person most familiar with the home environments of the children attending the two primary schools in question, the HSCL Coordinator emphasised the following:

> Well in terms of family structures there are … when I started here back in the 70's and in the early 80's as well, even when there was very high employment, in most cases there were two adults in the home, there were both parents in the home. Now with a lot of the children that we're dealing with, a high percentage, I would say quite a high … we're talking about more than 50%, there aren't two, to use the terminology "significant adults", in the home. (HSCL Coordinator)

This concern about changing family structures was compounded by the fact that many of the lone parents were extremely young and often required assistance from others in carrying out their parental responsibilities. As the HSCL Coordinator explained, "you have grandchildren living with the grandparents because the parent is very, very young and what is happening is that the age of the mother and the father is dropping significantly". He was very concerned that some of the former students of the senior primary school had recently become parents at an extremely young age and the likelihood for this to confirm the persistence of poverty and related deprivation for the next generation of children.

Intermingled with factors relating to intergenerational poverty, students' and parents' low self-esteem and lack of confidence, caused by feelings of inadequacy were seen to affect the relationship with school. The HSCL Coordinator described,

"...very often children are embarrassed about coming to school because they don't have the proper uniform, because they're not clean and because there's a head lice issue". He also explained that the children were often dealing with very complex problems at home and found it very difficult to cope at school. It was strongly believed that the structure and make-up of some families often resulted in a chaotic home routine that militated against getting children to school on time and appropriately equipped. The SCP Local Coordinator explained that the assumptions that are made in relation to the requirements of getting children to school on time, with the right books and with homework done, have to be put aside when trying to support families demonstrating dysfunction. She explained that for some children it is very difficult for them to concentrate in school if they are tired from insufficient sleep or hungry because they have not eaten breakfast. In her view, all these factors may lead to reluctance about attending school. A similar view was expressed by one of the EWOs:

> Dysfunction in a family you can often identify that from a very early
> stage, poor attendance, just the child arriving unprepared for the school
> day, no homework done, the whole thing of the uniform and all those
> things that are so important when you are trying to instil when the child
> is so young, [age] four or five. (EWO 2 Pilot)

There was also a view that parents were either implicitly or explicitly allowing their child to miss school as: "not only is the child missing school but they're being allowed to do so. And even when the parent is informed the parent hasn't got either the ability or the level of concern to actually change that pattern" (SCP Local

Coordinator). However, these views in relation to the role of parents were often contradictory and varied. The SCP Local Coordinator's views ranged from seeing parents as not interested: "parents thinking maybe wouldn't' bother ... too much hassle" to being unaware: "sure they'll catch up, it's no harm" or being apologetic "I hate taking them out of school. I'm sorry they're missing such and such and they're nearly apologising to you" (SCP Local Coordinator). These responses were specifically linked to parents of primary school children. The issue of the dynamic between parent's consent and the young child was also mentioned in relation to poor attendance at the various grade levels.

Prevalence of Absenteeism in the Schools

All those interviewed agreed that the percentage of absenteeism in the schools sampled for this study was an accurate representation and that it is too high and needs to be addressed. There was a strong view that in spite of this persistently high figure there has been steady improvement in the attendance of some students including those from the Traveller community, as "their attendance in the primary school is reasonably good" (VTT). Agreement was widely expressed that school attendance has gotten better for children from the Traveller community and that policies aimed at lessening exclusion, such as the end to segregated classes and the free transport system, have resulted in a much more inclusive classroom situation and many "[Traveller students] are getting up to the Junior Cert" (EWO 1). Both Principals were strongly of the view that the Traveller children were well settled and integrated in their respective schools. Where they expressed concern for particular children from the Travelling community with very irregular attendance and often

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accompanied by incidences of poor classroom behaviour, they noted that this was no different to other students that cause concern: "Travellers come in here, they play away, and they integrate. You go out in the yard and you wouldn't know who's a Traveller and who isn't" (PSS).

The general consensus was that the students whose families had come to Ireland from other countries were very likely to be poor school attendees and regularly took blocks of time off for holidays. One of the EWOs explained that much of his time was taken up trying to trace the whereabouts of these children. He explained that it can be difficult to implement the legislation which requires his service to ensure that all children have access to an education, as "there seems to be a problem with foreign nationals in terms of they'll enrol for six months, then they're gone again and nobody seems to know where they're going or what happens to them" (EWO 1). He emphasised that this leads to "a whole grey area there but we try our best to follow up by sending out emails to say this person is missing and give names, etc.". Similarly to the transient lifestyle of some Travellers, some other ethnic minorities created a difficulty: "Keeping tabs in terms of where the child is and if their child is getting an education or not. That's the difficulty" (EWO 1).

The limitations of a one-size-fits-all education system was viewed by one of the EWOs as a possible explanation as to why some "young people don't always just fit" and "will leave school" (EWO 2 Pilot). This feeling of not fitting in can be compounded through the experience of falling behind, as "it's about missing lessons and being behind and then feeling inadequate, if you like, and then not being able to keep up with other people" (SCP Local Coordinator). The Principal of the Junior

School (PJS) explained that even though she constantly emphasised the importance of regular attendance, so that the students would not fall behind academically and consequently feel inadequate, this effort was undermined by the fact that many of her students "feel they're never going to do brilliantly at school anyway".

Absenteeism in Infant Grades

The interviewees held a range of views on why students might be absent so much from infant classes, the primary reason generally seen to be young childhood illnesses. As one of the Principals explained:

> We still have had chicken pox and mumps even though they're supposed
>
> to have the injections, you know the vaccines for them, some of them
>
> don't. So we have had outbreaks. You can have that in their first year in
>
> school or just generally picking up bugs. (PJS)

These illnesses can be quite contagious and often lead to many students being out of school at the same time. It was also noted that these illnesses can be particularly prevalent among Traveller children and may be a reason for so many missing from the infant classes as "there would be a number of Traveller children and again [they are] prone to the sickness at a very early age as well, quite vulnerable children I think, you know, given the lifestyle" (EWO 2 Pilot).

Six of those interviewed referred to the legislation (Education (Welfare) Act [Government of Ireland 2000]) requirement that the NEWB can only intervene with children over the age of six years. The seventh interviewee, the SCP Local Coordinator, explained that she hadn't realised that this was specified in legislation.

The understood rationale, according to the other interviewees, for this specific clause in the Act was that six years is the statutory age of compulsory schooling in Ireland. However, as the majority of Irish children attend school from the age of four or five, this was seen as being a potential weakness, causing ambiguity in the provision of early intervention and prevention services. All those interviewed felt that school going can be habit-forming and that like most habits it is better to start as young as possible, "that like a lot of these habits, they start early and they only get worse as they go along, so the sooner that they're cut out the better" (PSS).

The prevalence of young children being kept at home by their parents was often understood to be caused by young parents not being able to get the children to bed early and up for school and into a positive routine and "....[they] would find it more difficult to get them in and out every day. They would find it easier perhaps to keep them at home if there were problems" (EWO 1). There was agreement that the expectation (within the legislation) should be that the child would attend as much as possible and that this was as essential at four or five years as at six years. There was also reference to the fact that there was an Early Start Programme in the Junior School which could cater for up to 30 pre-school children within two split sessions. The PJS thought it would be better if there were more places (40) available in the Early Start Programme as then there might be a seamless transition from early years' provision to infant grades. However, the HSCL Coordinator explained that some "parents will enrol their child in early start but if they get the child into the day nursery, then they would send the child to the day nursery [because] the hours are longer".

Concern was expressed in relation to the age six statutory requirement under the EWA 2000 even though it appeared that this was not identified as a real barrier to early intervention. In practice it seemed that through figures, collected by the schools for the Department of Education and Skills, for all children attending primary school that all those concerned did respond to serious non attendance within the infant classes even though most of the students were under six years:

> Well it [absenteeism] can be [high in infant classes]. I mean that's where it starts obviously so. Very, very occasionally where I see that there's an extremely poor record; I think it's appropriate to make some intervention at that time, even though legally there's no obligation. (EWO 1)

This EWO also noted that he was required to act within the legislation and to focus on the rights of pupils from age six to sixteen to attend school but that if a particular school Principal was alarmed about a younger child he offered support, if possible. The PJS, the interviewee most exercised by this issue, argued very strongly that the responsibility to send a child to school should apply straight away upon enrolment. Even though she did feel that the EWO she worked with is sympathetic towards her concern for four and five year olds she also understood that his capacity to respond was limited by the often more urgent situations on his caseload. This often resulted in prioritisation in relation to post-primary students, with "the welfare officers at the moment will tell you that they've so much at the upper end that they wouldn't have the time to be going hunting after four-year-olds" (PJS). Doubt was also expressed by the HSCL Coordinator as to the effectiveness of earlier intervention in the absence of success in the case of children that are over six years:

It's not as if the system for over six is working. You know, it isn't like

there's an injection or something you're saying look we can give it to the

seven year olds but we can't give it to the six year olds and if we could

give it to the six -year olds, it'd cure them as well but ... you know it

isn't as if it's being cured at the six plus age either. (HSCL Coordinator)

The latter sentiments linked to the broader issue of the capacity of the NEWB

to respond and the prioritisations within its workload. This view arises during many

of the other themes discussed at the interviews. In relation to specific students and

the age six requirement, the PJS explained that many of the Polish children tended to

miss a lot of days when in the infant classes:

In Poland [the children] don't go to school until six anyway, so as far as

the parents are concerned this is an opportunity to learn English really.

You know, they're not all that worried about their academic achievement

[at this stage].

Absenteeism in Grades 1 to 6

In contrast to the concern expressed above about absenteeism in the infant

classes, there was a general view that attendance settles down in first class and

remains fairly steady until the higher classes of fifth and sixth. There was some

agreement that attendance in second class can worsen after the children make their

first communion, particularly within the Travelling community, as they are

traditionally very serious about participation in religious ceremonies and "[often] go

after communion, the communion factor [within] the Traveller community" (SCP

Local Coordinator). It was noted that Traveller children were often inclined to leave school, for the remainder of a specific academic year, after religious ceremonies such as communion and confirmation and particularly if there are other problems. As the VTT explained, "I think particularly with 6th class children who might have behavioural problems they tend to opt out after the confirmation" (VTT). However, the PJS, responsible for the first communion classes, agrees that some Traveller children have left after communion and at a higher grade after confirmation, but emphasised that it depends on the family as it is not true of most Traveller children, in her experience. The two Principals expressed surprise that the roll book figures for 2006/2007 showed less absenteeism in 2nd and 3rd grade than in other grades. This was understood as unusual but in the absence of other comparable data these findings were not subject to further examination.

A link was highlighted between the students in the higher classes and their age. Being older and usually becoming more independent of their parents often led, for various reasons, to more irregular attendance. The tendency to miss days here and there in sixth class was identified as often indicating a shift of the power dynamics within families and occasionally resulted in the student deciding her/himself to stay at home from school:

> Well what you'd see my worst, even in terms of my secondary school
>
> cases, you'd see a lot of them would've started off in sixth class. That
>
> seems to be a pattern. It's when the child gets to a certain age and begins
>
> to, having learned not to attend or having picked up the bad habits, or
>
> habituated to irregular attendance, the child then turns the tables in terms

of the power dynamic. The child then is said to be in charge in sixth class and starts refusing to go. (EWO 1)

Absenteeism at this stage (higher classes) was of much more concern among most of the interviewees. This was linked to the emergence of serious issues after transition to post-primary level. All those interviewed, including those whose main focus tends to be on absenteeism at post-primary level, emphasised the importance of watching out for students in 5th and 6th class and monitoring their attendance, as described by the SCP Local Coordinator: "I would be concerned about any absenteeism from school on any level, but more so [in] 5th and 6th and especially from a secondary school point of view". This concern for students of the higher classes was shared by all and linked to the fear of the students' level of absenteeism becoming more severe after transition to post-primary school.

Absenteeism and Gender

One of the interview questions focused on the relationship between gender and school absenteeism. The ensuing responses indicated a weak association according to most interviewee's experience. The PSS was concerned about gender but only in the way that it caused an imbalance in the overall numbers attending his school:

We're two thirds [boys], one third [girls]. Yeah, and that's the reason. And that also you see when you get into sort of a downward spiral then. If you're going to have more boys you're going to have ... therefore you're going to have more problems. Things are not as nicely balanced. (PSS)

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The Principal explained that he had experienced less disciplinary problems when a more equal balance existed, in the classroom, between boys and girls. Both the junior and senior school had approximately two-thirds boys to one third girls, however, this imbalance was emphasised more by the PSS than by the PJS. All the interviewees concurred that the general perception might be that boys are absent more often than girls but that this did not represent their overall experience. There was a view that girls often applied certain strategies that subsequently masked problems:

> I suppose I find I deal a lot more with boys because I know in terms of expulsions and stuff like that and getting to that stage, mind you I have dealt with a couple of young girls that have been expelled or that apply to another school or else they would be expelled. But I wouldn't know how it breaks down. (EWO 2 Pilot)

This latter view related to experience with post-primary level pupils and was reiterated by the SCP Local Coordinator, as in her experience the students considered most at risk are boys within her all male post-primary schools. She explained that in comparison to her colleagues, working with all female schools, she would have far more students categorised as being at risk of early school leaving. She surmised that this was the same at primary level, however, my discussions did not generally elucidate any further on this matter with the exception of views expressed in relation to young girls from the Travelling community:

> Well [Traveller] girls more so because girls, I don't know, I think there's some sort of militating trend, I don't know, I'm not an expert, but the

education of girls in area x is not considered as perhaps significant as

boys. But that's just a surface impression I have. It could very well be

incorrect. (EWO 1)

Girls were often referred to as the potential carer in the family, particularly of

younger children, and this was often connected to the cultural background of the

student. Where this was the case, both generally and within the Travelling

community, it was noted that girls regularly missed school and that this appeared to

be with permission from their parents. The PSS referred to one particular girl from

the Travelling community in the following way:

> [Girl's name] used to be kept out of school by the mother to mind the
>
> younger children. Any time of the day of the week you'd go over into
>
> Tesco there and you'd see her coming, pushing a pram and pulling
>
> another child and the buggy full of shopping.

Absenteeism and Periods of Time

Much emphasis was placed on the need to prohibit the development of an in-

and-out culture as this may cause difficulties for children such as problems with

settling back into school and catching up on both the academic work and social

interactions. This in turn can lead to an unwillingness to attend and to the

development of a self-perpetuating cycle. There was a strong belief that certain

children display a resistance to regular attendance and that they missed days here and

there and this became a pattern throughout their school days.

There was no surprise expressed by the interviewees that absenteeism on Fridays was extremely high in the roll book figures, with Monday coming in as a high second. All those interviewed agreed that this happens for various reasons and that this pattern remains prevalent in spite of the schools adopting a range of intervention strategies. The strategies adopted to counter this included incentives such as "They get a lovely bag of fruit on a Friday, which is a nice little treat" and "Friday is Principal's Award Day, it's specifically on Friday to try and be an added incentive to come into school because like if they had got their four stars all week and they miss Friday, they're not even in the draw" (PJS). The schools monitored the Friday / Monday pattern through the work of the Attendance Monitor as described: "by the continuous and focused approach of the person employed as monitor resulted in the compilation of clear statistics allowing for immediate action [if] a child starts missing every Monday and Friday or children go home for half days and don't come back again, [it will be noticed]" (PSS).

The HSCL Coordinator's commented that the students who tended to miss days here and there, including Mondays and Fridays, were of most concern to him. He explained that "….it's that group, I don't know, 20% mightn't be the right figure, who are missing a day a week, sometimes two days a week as they tended to be a small group" that are the children with the highest absenteeism and miss days regularly, throughout the year. He made a distinction between these students and those that might be miss a day, occasionally, for sickness or a family occasion which would usually be explained by the parents.

In relation to the possible reasons for this pattern some of the interviewees suspected that the attraction of having a long weekend was sometimes the explanation. They also linked it with the payment of social protection payments on a Thursday and a reluctance to get up early the following day. Some of the occasional days off were attributed to students from Traveller families taking days off school to attend family occasions such as funerals and weddings. According to the VTT:

> They tend to be quite religious. So those periods of time are taken out of
>
> school and that's part of the Traveller culture. Other than that, they
>
> would be the same as any children in disadvantaged areas, as regards
>
> attendance. (VTT)

As seen in the findings, the percentage of absenteeism increased steadily from September to June in the 2006/2007 school year, with the exception of some clustering at holiday periods. This was also of no surprise to the interviewees. It was generally agreed that most students began the school year on a positive note but maintaining this standard was a challenge for all involved. There was much concern for the children whose absenteeism was seen as habitual. They also tended to be categorised as unexplained in terms of reasons for not attending and were "the ones that would cause us concern, [wondering] what is going on there?" (EWO 2 Pilot). These pupils were identified as having ongoing issues which differed from those absent occasionally as a result of certain life events such as the death of a relative, attending weddings and adherence to religious rituals.

Occasional absenteeism was also identified as happening after a school-related incident in the classroom, such as bullying or a row with a friend or the class teacher.

There was overwhelming agreement that if a problem resulted from a classroom
incident that this would become known to the teacher and or School Principal very
quickly and would be dealt with speedily. In situations that students stayed away
from school because of such incidents the parents would quickly inform the school
and it would normally be addressed satisfactorily and would not usually result in
continuous absenteeism:

> There might be an incident in school that somebody has annoyed them.
>
> But that wouldn't be a consistent behaviour. That wouldn't be why
>
> they'd stayed out of school for 20 days. They might refuse for a couple of
>
> days until its sorted out and as I say if there's a parent there that's sorting
>
> it out for them, ringing up a head teacher, tell me why he's being like
>
> this, then a matter like that gets sorted out very quickly. (SCP Local
>
> Coordinator)

Although these situations were only seen as an occasional occurrence, there
was a strong association between an event happening at school and parents
contacting the school on behalf of their child. As the PSS explained:

> [The parent would] be up very quickly if they feel that the teacher's
>
> being unfair or they don't like the teacher. I'd hear about that very
>
> quickly. Usually that's usually resolved. It's rarely that that's an ongoing
>
> issue, you know. (PSS)

The HSCL Coordinator explained that finding out what might be upsetting a
young student can be difficult as often they may "not be able to articulate why he or
she was upset" and this would be more complex to sort out. The reasons for the upset

and consequently not wanting to attend school could include something that happened in school between a student and teacher, or between a student and another student, either from their class or another class. According to the HSCL Coordinator it can range from something as simple as not having homework done to "something very major that there was an ongoing bullying issue that we weren't aware of". One of the EWOs explained that sometimes the school can feel they have dealt with the problem but that the parents may remain concerned, especially in relation to their child and bullying.

The pattern of occasional absenteeism was perceived to differ substantially from that shown by students that missed blocks of time for reasons such as holidays or illness. Within the blocks of time scenario there was evidence of a different attitude emerging towards those children that were taking long holidays and those that were classified as being ill. Even though there was more empathy for those students absent due to illness, seen as explained absence, it was also identified as meriting further investigation, in certain circumstances.

There was general agreement that many children missed time in June or the festive seasons as a result of family holidays. In addition children from non-Irish family backgrounds often returned to their home countries for long periods. The students that missed on block were seen to have a different effect on the figures than those that missed occasionally and both the SCP Local Coordinator and the PJS indicated that, as these children were more transient than others, the figures masked certain improvements in the attendance of some students:

The block [absenteeism] was the non-nationals. So if you took two lots and compared them it would be very interesting to see because you would actually notice the huge rise in attendance, whereas now you compare the two, you wouldn't really see a huge difference. But we know it's a difference, the whole demographics, when Principals have said it that you know the Irish [children] are missing bits and bobs and maybe on a Friday and maybe they're off somewhere or whatever, the block is different. (SCP Local Coordinator)

There was also reference to children from the Travelling community and an emphasis on the belief, outlined already, that in most cases, their attendance pattern was similar to that of the other children and that their overall attendance has greatly improved in recent years. The exception to this is when they take time to go on family trips, including attending religious ceremonies. Even of more concern was the pattern of Traveller students disappearing without explanation or as the PSS explained, "You can have travellers arriving, they enrol and you don't see them again". This appeared to have caused a lot of complications for all the services as they try to locate the children, sometimes without success, and has implications for the school returns to NEWB as outlined in the next section.

Theme 2: Legislation-Education (Welfare) Act 2000

All those interviewed were aware of the Act and indicated a willingness to embrace the roles and responsibilities outlined in the legislation. However, there was also a certain level of criticism of the policy and its perceived lack of satisfactory implementation, as described by the HSCL Coordinator: "I don't think the Education Welfare Board has the resources to implement what is now statute". This view was also articulated by the SCP Local Coordinator:

> There are so many things wrong with the whole system of referral over to NEWB. The thing about it is, first of all I don't know how many people they need to staff the whole programme for it to be effective.

There appeared to be a strong sense that the level of resources required for the legislation to be implemented in full was too costly. All the interviewees stressed that the system was designed to provide a response to the school notification of absenteeism, but that the added bureaucracy resulted in a further distancing between those professionals in direct contact with the students and the officers responsible for school attendance. However, there was also much evidence that the schools were embracing the requirements of the legislation and were aware of their responsibilities.

Twenty Days - Indicator of a Problem

The merit of 20 days absent, being the figure that represents concern and by which time all those involved should raise the alarm and intervene to improve a child's attendance, was one of the sub-themes relating to the legislation. All those

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interviewed agreed that the legislation was required to indicate clearly a specific

number of days that are deemed acceptable, and 20 days cut-off is "a reasonable

figure. I suppose it's four school weeks which you know seems a lot I suppose in one

way but then if it's scattered over…"(PSS). There was an overwhelming sense that to

miss 20 days in a given school year is a solid indictor that all might not be well for a

particular child. It is seen as an alarm mechanism, alerting the system to intervene on

behalf of the child as quickly as possible. This view was shared by all involved but

stated more emphatically by some:

> 20 days is far too many in a school year, absolutely far too many [days to
>
> miss]. I couldn't see how you could allocate a bigger figure you know,
>
> because if it was a larger figure then there would be more days missed
>
> before any intervention was put in place, before it got serious. It should
>
> be serious at 10. (SCP Local Coordinator)

It was also seen as a useful tool for schools to apply when encouraging parents

to send the children to school:

> I think that's [20 days] a useful figure, the thing I say to parents when
>
> I'm talking to them about attendance, it's not just, if your child has just
>
> missed 20 days, it's not just those 20 days. It's the day before and the day
>
> after. The day the child comes in, doesn't know what was going on from
>
> yesterday, he can switch off, in the knowledge that maybe he won't be in
>
> the next day. So it's not just the day that they're out that they lose, the
>
> day they're in, they lose. (PJS)

There was agreement that like all thresholds, the 20 day limit is not definitive as an indicator of a problem, as it can have various interpretations depending on the circumstances. A student that has a few bouts of illness can clock up 20 days fairly quickly. Extended holiday periods also result in a crossing over of the threshold and "so you could have hit 20 days because you took an extended Christmas holiday and you're not really a referral case because you've been in [usually]" (SCP Local Coordinator). There was also a view held that the 20 days threshold can have many implications for parental behaviour as some parents have interpreted this as permission for children to miss up to 20 days. In addition, if there are no specific consequences after the threshold is crossed, this has been identified as one of the downsides of having a threshold:

> It's better to have it [20 days cut off] anyway, how well it works, how
>
> efficient it is, I would have a question mark over that because a lot of
>
> parents know that nothing is going to be done if they're more than 20
>
> days absent. (VTT)

School Returns to NEWB

The system of notification requires schools to make five reports to the NEWB annually. There was general agreement that this additional requirement of reporting was "onerous enough" (EWO 1) on some schools, particularly at primary level, where administrative resources are more limited than at post-primary level:

> I suppose initially there was some resistance to it, particularly as it is an
>
> administrative task and it is an additional administrative task and

particularly [for] schools that don't have resources and primarily at

primary level where they are quite limited and so there was some

resistance. *(EWO 2 Pilot)*

In contrast to this criticism the making of returns to a central point was

welcomed generally, as a smart way to collect figures and a good use of modern

technology. Early technical problems often caused frustration as they were deemed

to result in double the work on occasions as figures returned electronically often had

to be returned manually when the technological system failed. However, the PSS was

quick to point out that he thinks that the system had improved recently. He is no

longer involved in inputting the data directly anymore as this function is currently

part of the role of the Attendance Monitor (explained in school strategies). The

experience of taking on the administrative tasks required to make the legally obliged

returns seemed to depend a lot on the specific circumstances of each school as the

SCP Local Coordinator outlined:

> The schools that don't have that [much resources], it really just depends
>
> on the system, the teacher and the Principal. They're all different. Some
>
> people are great at keeping logs of this, that and the other but there's only
>
> so much paper work that they can do.

A certain amount of the frustration about implementing the new system of data

recording was immersed in a hankering for the positive aspects of the previous

system and the role of the former School Attendance Officer. Most of those

interviewed are very experienced teachers and worked with the system that existed

prior to the most recent legislation and lamented the positive aspects of it. However,

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they conceded that the former system was extremely limited, both geographically and in the methods of data collection, and all those interviewed welcomed the intention behind the new legislation.

There also seemed to be a strong sense that implementation is improving as the policy becomes more embedded and all those involved are clearer about their roles. A lot of emphasis was placed on the response of the individual EWO and how she/he relates to the schools in her/his catchment area:

> He's [EWO] a lot more efficient than other EWOs. He is recent enough. He's a big improvement on the previous EWO. He is here about two years. Like I can lift the phone and phone him, and he'll know who I'm talking about or he'll phone me. And you know he's active. If there's a severe case he's active. (PSS)

However, there seemed to be doubt as to the degree to which the new policy and its implementation has delivered in terms of appropriate responses to concern raised by the schools in relation to particular children's absenteeism. There was agreement between some of the interviewees that schools develop trust and belief in a system once they see results and action on the part of the educational welfare service:

> Quite obviously where there isn't a service, you know, there quite often can be a lot of cynicism attached to it, that you [schools] are sending in these returns and yet there is no real follow up attached to it, you know so, we are quite limited by, you know, our own resources. (EWO 2 Pilot)

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There was much reference to the expectation on the part of schools that the NEWB should respond to the schools when alerted to children they are concerned about and the ensuing disappointment and mistrust in the system if this does not happen. Relating back to the findings from the roll books, the interviewees were not surprised when I explained about the students that I removed from the actual sample. They explained that the students whose names are on the roll books but not in attendance could be due to the system of schools notifying each other when a student registers in another school as this often does not work in practise. This meant that sometimes students may not be removed from the old school register or roll book and as a consequence may be marked absent, mistakenly, for a number of days or even weeks. According to the Principals this often resulted in skewed returns. Concern was also expressed that the current system of data collection was not able to provide information about the various categories of students but instead all the students are seen as a homogeneous group. The interviewees stated that they needed better methods of collecting the data to help them identify the true extent of the problem in relation to the various categories of students in their care.

Theme 3: Prevention and Intervention Strategies

The interview questions under the theme of prevention and intervention strategies focused on two primary elements: specific intervention and prevention strategies and inter-agency collaboration. Most of those interviewed agreed that they held responsibilities in relation to decreasing school absenteeism, preventing school leaving and ensuring school retention. Answers to questions in this section included descriptions of each interviewee's own role, in the context of the organisation within

which they worked, and their understanding of the responsibilities held by personnel in other agencies. It became clear that all the interviewees perceived themselves as having some responsibility for specific programmes and activities aimed at ensuring children attend school. However, the HSCL Coordinator claimed an indirect role, described as supporting parents and consequently encouraging them to send their children to school. I will elaborate on this after outlining the features of specific school interventions and the perceived impact these strategies are having on improving school attendance.

There was general agreement that it is now common practice for schools to have attendance policies and that these are developed through cooperation with the NEWB. This view was shared by one of the EWOs as he explained, "EWOs are trying to take a more pro-active role in some respects in terms of formulating the attendance policies and of identifying best practice. So you know, I suppose it's just back to close liaison with schools really" (EWO 1). At primary level, schools were seen as open to assistance in formulating attendance strategies, as it was often more straightforward for them to implement certain strategies such as school awards as "the primary schools definitely have a more strategies based approach. I suppose because it's easier to have these kinds of awards systems in primary school, you know, with [younger] children" (EWO 1). The schools have put in place several procedures to ensure they fulfil the requirement, outlined in the legislation, to notify the NEWB when a student has missed over 20 days and to promote attendance. These procedures include the employment of Attendance Monitors and the operation of various reward systems.

School Attendance Monitors

The tracking and reporting of school absenteeism are the main functions allocated to the Attendance Monitors. Much emphasis was placed on the specific role of Attendance Monitors, employed by the schools and funded by the School Completion Programme. In the case of these schools the people employed were local women and they also held other secretarial duties. There was general consensus that this development has increased the accuracy of the monitoring of the daily attendance of the primary school students. At the time of the interviews the system was in existence for two years in these schools. It was preceded by a less formal system, as outlined by the PJS, and involved "the Attendance Monitor coming once a week, she was very efficient and all that but it's not enough". This view was collaborated by the PSS, who stated, "When I came here first, there was an Attendance Monitor that just used to come in from outside and that really had little benefit". The current system, whereby the "school Secretary is paid as a Monitor, she takes the attendance every day, not according to the roll book. She sends out a sheet to the teachers" (PJS), was seen to be much more efficient and producing more significant results. Both Principals and the SCP Local Coordinator expressed much satisfaction with this system:

> I think it's that they're [the parents] aware that someone is actually paid now to do that job completely. That's their job to do that every day and that it's the same person and it's consistent so that you can't give the same excuse to the same person all the time because they'll know that

there's a pattern or behaviour, or a pattern or a record of poor attendance

and they'll be keeping an eye on them. (SCP Local Coordinator)

The continuous and focused approach of the person employed as Monitor

resulted in the compilation of up-to-date figures allowing for immediate action. This

involved either a phone call or letter to the parents by one of the Principals, as

described by the PJS: "She does it by the month and then we mark the cut off dates, I

send a note out warning people if they're getting close or that they've been reported

and that I expect an improvement". The role played by the monitor was seen as very

valuable because in both schools the people employed in this role were known to the

children and the families and tended to be very aware when problems were arising:

"The fact that [the Attendance Monitor] is here now, she knows the children. I can

say, if something comes up, what to do, and she'll make the phone call" (PSS).

This primary intervention system was viewed by one of the EWOs as an

important step in the prevention process, as it outlined to parents that in the event of

"[their child missing] 20 days they [the school Principals] are now required to inform

the NEWB. So that sort of effort by schools, also inviting the parents to provide

explanations, [was very helpful]" (EWO 2 Pilot). The Principals explained that they

informed the parents on regular occasions that they should notify the school if their

child is unable to attend and to give the reason so that they are not marked down as

"unexplained days, which does not look good" (PJS). If a student is out for more than

two days without any explanation, the Attendance Monitor contacts the parents

thereby providing a tracking process so that students do not get left behind and "it's

picked up and dealt with" (SCP Local Coordinator). In the case of children from the

Travelling community the VTT explained:

> If Traveller children are absent they'll [Attendance Monitor] sometimes
>
> ring me and let me know who's absent and maybe I can follow up with a
>
> home visit. It does [seem to be a good strategy], it seems to be working.
>
> (VTT)

This system encouraged parents to improve the attendance of their children in

the immediacy stage of the emergence of a problem. The HSCL Coordinator saw the

intervention of the Attendance Monitor as making a significant difference due to the

parents receiving a "reminder" as "some parents just [need] that little spur" to get

their children into school. The SCP Local Coordinator also felt that this strategy "has

worked very well" and that, "if you asked all the Principals one thing that they would

not let go, I know for a fact, it would be attendance [Monitors]"(SCP Local

Coordinator). The success of the system became very apparent when they saw "huge

changes within two months of putting in Attendance Monitors into some schools"

(SCP Local Coordinator). While this positive view of the system was shared by all

involved in the interviews, the PJS expressed a lot of disappointment that this

perceived improvement in attendance is not apparent in the overall attendance

figures. Both of the Principals and the SCP Local Coordinator were forceful in their

belief that there have been improvements in the attendance of the children that are

enrolled in the schools on a long-term basis. They believe that a possible explanation

for the percentage figure for absenteeism remaining consistently high is as a result of

the patterns associated with either the non-Irish national children or with the

Traveller children with a nomadic lifestyle. This view was expressed as follows:

> We take up these figures this year now and it's very disappointing, with
>
> all the work. But then again, as I said, it's definitely the statistics are
>
> skewed by what's happening us. But I would honestly say to you that that
>
> has been skewed by the non-nationals and the Travellers who vanished
>
> for so long. (PJS)

The emphasis being placed on the efforts to improve attendance was openly

demonstrable through interventions such as the one described above. Much effort

was put into blending this approach with other school-based strategies such as

specific incentives and reward systems.

Reward Systems and Related Activities

The purpose of reward systems, as outlined by the PJS, was to soften the

impact of continuous monitoring. Rewards were applied by way of incentivising the

students to improve their attendance. The system in the junior school included having

a chart in every classroom with each student's name on it. At the end of every school

week, the students that had not missed a day that week received a Principal's stamp.

There followed a monthly award ceremony whereby those that didn't miss any days

were awarded a small prize. This ceremony was also repeated at the end of each term

and the final reward for not missing any days was given at the end of the school year.

This system dovetailed with other prizes so that it was incorporated as an important

aspect of school life. The Principal explained that this system played to the fact that

children can be very spirited and, "[in] some classes the children can be quite competitive. So they don't care like. They don't think he's off school, [they say] 'You're not going to get your stamp'" (PJS). In the senior school, the system applied was called Discipline for Learning (DFL) and as a "reward-based system they [the students] get stamps and stars and prizes and stuff like that" (PSS). The Principal described the unexpected outcome of this system as being the identification of a small number of students standing out from the majority in the class whose behaviour had improved dramatically. He explained that this often implied that the classroom teacher had more time to devote to the children whose behaviour, including non-attendance, was difficult.

Another form of incentive that was utilised was the operation of out-of-school activities such as breakfast and after-school clubs. In the interviews there was very little focus in our discussion on the possible connection between these activities and school attendance. There was almost a sense that these activities are now part of school life and did not merit further review or discussion. However, the VTT highlighted how important the breakfast and afterschool clubs were for the Traveller children, helping them to socialise with other children. The schools also adjusted some of the school occasions, such as confirmation and celebrating birthdays so that they could encourage and subsequently improve school attendance. According to one of the EWOs he found, "a lot of schools brought the confirmation later in the school year to try and ensure that the kid is in as long as they can possibly have them in"(EWO 2 Pilot). As a preventative measure the class teachers regularly arranged to have cake and a few party games, etc. in the classes in the junior school to act as an

incentive to children to attend school on their birthdays. This was referred to by the PJS as follows:

> Children are given days off for their birthdays here [by their parents]. Now teachers try to combat that by having these hats with the things hanging out and we've all to sing 'Happy Birthday' and everything but still some children want to come in for their birthday but most children [say] 'It's my birthday so I have a day off'. (PJS)

The schools' strategies also included promotional and information-sharing activities such as regular parent meetings. At these sessions the Principal and occasionally the EWO explained the legislation and the responsibilities of all those involved in ensuring that children attend school. The EWO described how he regularly presented at these meetings and was also often called in to speak to students directly:

> Like we go into schools and we'd speak to pupils in a classroom setting where you have two different years and I explain who I am, what I do and why I do it and what they can expect and what the responsibilities are of their parents and so on attendance. (EWO 1)

In addition to these sessions there was general consensus that one of the most effective strategies was the letter home and the invitation to the parents to visit the school and examine the attendance records. This allowed the parents to see the figures first-hand and to realise that patterns are being studied and thereby it is not that easy to go under the radar:

They [the parents] do actually get a fright when they see the roll book. Now that's something I've learned over the years. They're shocked at how many days they've missed and then when they make the point that he was sick, and you can say but I can compare this. I know your child in St Al's has missed the same number of days. (PJS)

This view was also held by the VTT, who felt that the parents were often surprised that the occasional day off here and there can accumulate to a large amount so quickly. She also found it very helpful to make the situation clear to them and outline the consequences. Improvements of attendance within the Travelling community at primary level were broadly recognised. The part played by highlighting the success of role models was explained by the VTT as follows:

There was an open day in the College of Surgeons recently and we brought some Travellers to it so they got to have a look at the college to see what going to college would be like. And they got a talk from a few different people in the college and there were two Travellers attending there. And they got up and spoke to the students and ... there's one in first year I think and one in second year. So what I'm hoping to do is to link in with those two students and get them to come out to the schools and talk to the students. Because we need role models big time. (VTT)

Programmes that targeted parents either in activities that might interest them directly or in relation to their children's education were organised primarily through the HSCL Coordinator or occasionally though the School Completion Programme as described below:

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They [parents] do the maths together. So it's great because it is a way of getting the parents into the school and about them being pro-active and interested and as a result they want to send their children there. As a result they don't want them to be missing days and they realise the importance. (SCP Local Coordinator)

Many courses for parents including English language classes were organised by the HSCL Coordinator as a means of encouraging parents to enter the school world. As the PSS explained, "HSCL Coordinator is sort of cosying you [parents] along, getting you involved in some sort of course, you know getting something positive happening in the school". These positive activities included "a computer class or maybe a sort of a personal development course, making you feel better about yourself" (PSS). Views on the merits of these approaches will be highlighted following the next section, which focuses on the interaction and collaboration between the schools and many other agencies involved with children and their education.

Inter-Agency Collaboration

All those interviewed worked closely with other colleagues, including those employed by various statutory and voluntary agencies, to ensure that the students in their care were encouraged to attend school. This agency collaboration took different shapes, depending on the role and responsibilities of the personnel concerned. As mentioned in the introduction to this section, all the people interviewed, with the exception of the HSCL Coordinator, saw their role as including a direct

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responsibility in relation to school attendance. Reliance on support from other colleagues appeared to differ depending on the agency and the people involved. This will be outlined firstly through portraying the perceived role and responsibilities of the EWO as explained by them and the other interviewees. Subsequently I will outline the perceived experience of inter-agency cooperation as described by their colleagues.

The EWOs emphasised clear and positive cooperation between the NEWB and other services as being a critical element in prevention and early intervention strategies. This was described comprehensively in the pilot interview as follows:

It [inter-agency work] is critical because there is a view that there is quite a lot of duplication and overlap and within the school attendance / retention arena, there are various different services, as I mentioned, the VTT, HSCL Coordinator and the SCP, where they are operating in schools they should be the first people to identify kids that are at risk of poor school attendance, under achievement or early school leaving and it is only where they recognise that the parents are not cooperating that I would get involved, where you have other schools that don't have any of those resources and it might be better, my time might be better utilised working with those schools because they effectively don't have those resources but the whole disadvantaged thing requires us to work collaboratively with those other services operating within schools. (EWO 2 Pilot)

It is clear that where schools had designated disadvantaged status, a plethora of other agencies was involved and subsequently the prioritisation of students and agreement of roles became an essential element of supporting children and their families with school attendance. The EWO in the pilot described how important it was to firstly establish "whoever the key person is in the school and ask who else has been in there and who else has done what, I wouldn't start running off, knocking on doors, and finding out, I'd let others do that" (EWO 2 Pilot). One of the dilemmas for the EWOs was reflected in the efforts that they put into discerning whether a notice of 20 days absence is indicative of an emerging problem or is a once off, fully understandable situation such as occasional childhood illness. The limitations attached to "looking at raw data, just to figure out which is which and when you need to target your efforts effectively" (EWO 1) implies reliance on others such as school Principals, etc. to provide the entire story. This often happens when "you get somebody on 20 days and they're just sick and the parent hasn't managed to get a note yet from the hospital but does so a week later and that's fine then" (EWO 1). This interviewee continued to describe the importance of being able to contact personnel such as the VTT and the SCP Local Coordinator in order to investigate what might be behind the statistics and figures supplied by the school and "it [inter-agency contact] would be more ad hoc and informal but it would be every day. I'd speak to the School Completion Project generally, well most days. I'd meet with the VTT fairly often as well" (EWO 1).

The VTT concurred that she "worked with approximately five Education Welfare Officers" and "linked in with the Public Health Nurse and with the Social

Workers" as part of the interagency work going on all the time. She viewed that "for the most part everything is pretty clear [for agencies working together]" (VTT). An active relationship with the assigned EWO was welcomed by the school Principals as "the fact that he's [EWO] more active, that sort of strengthens our hand" (PSS). This contact benefitted from the school attendance monitoring system:

> They [EWOs] would have great contact with our Attendance Monitors. I don't see them now really, but they do keep great contact with the Principals and the Attendance Monitors. Then it's up to their role really, after that [after notification]. (SCP Local Coordinator)

The contact between the Attendance Monitors and the VTT also appeared very effective as was mentioned earlier. In addition, the VTT attempted to trace children that went missing from a particular school by "....linking up with the visiting teacher who might be in the area that we think they have gone to. Sometimes you can locate them" (VTT). This assistance was important for schools as "the schools cannot take the [students] off the roll until they find the name of the school that they've transferred to" (VTT). Cooperation with the SCP Local Coordinator was primarily via the Attendance Monitors, and the VTT also explained that she "attended two School Completion Programme meetings here probably you know once every couple of weeks" (VTT). This contact was also replicated between the SCP Local Coordinator and the HSCL Coordinator, as the latter was described as "invaluable to us now, they're great" (SCP Local Coordinator). The value being placed in these forms of communication was seen as particularly vital when students were displaying behavioural problems as the VTT described, "I'm working with the home school

person and school completion as well, linking them in to where the student [with behavioural issues] can have a link person in the school if they're having difficulty" (VTT).

Asked about his role and responsibilities in the area of school attendance, the HSCL Coordinator explained that he and his colleagues had been advised, within their service "not to become closely associated with attendance". He described his role as being "to support the parent around attendance" (HSCL Coordinator). This view was collaborated by others such as the PJS, who agreed that "it's specified in their [HSCL Coordinator] role that they're not to be involved in attendance" (SPJ). The view that the remit of the HSCL Coordinator was to be "the friendly face of the school" (HSCL Coordinator) was recognised by the Principals and explained partially the reluctance of the HSCL Coordinator to be seen to be "dealing with attendance" (HSCL Coordinator), as if he "becomes associated with that, it means you know if I'm seen on the road and knocking on somebody's door, that perception goes out there I'm calling oh there must be a problem" (HSCL Coordinator). The possibility of negative undertones attached to identifying attendance as a problem was cited by the HSCL Coordinator as a probable barrier to building up supporting and trusting relationships with parents. This is the basis by which the HSCL Coordinator "[works] to create an atmosphere that will encourage the child to go to school" (HSCL Coordinator). In spite of the obvious reluctance to work directly on attendance issues, he shared the rationale behind his approach and the inevitable indirect focus on attendance when he relayed the following:

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Our remit is to support parents and to look at the parent as the prime

educator and then the things that follow on from that and of course one of

them has to be attendance. If the child is not attending then obviously

there is an issue. There is a problem straight away. When you just look at

the figures, the ball figures I think they can be skewed for reasons I have

been speaking about earlier on and sometimes you have to look a little bit

more closely at the figures. And from my point, from my job, I don't

look at the figures at all. I just look at the family. If the child is attending

or if the children, because very often there'll more than one, if they're not

attending, (but) that is to me only a symptom of a greater problem

usually. (HSCL Coordinator)

The HSCL Coordinator explained his role as working with the families and

with other Home School Coordinators such as those in the nearby post-primary

schools. His work also involved contact with the SCP Local Coordinator but not with

the EWO whom he "rarely if ever sees" (HSCL Coordinator). As mentioned earlier

he lamented the ending of the "old school attendance [system]" as he "used to see

[the officer] on a regular basis in the school" (HSCL Coordinator), and what was

usually an informal word that he had with her, sharing concerns about particular

students meant that they could both synchronize their involvement and ensure they

were "working on the same page" (HSCL Coordinator). He referred to an absence of

a formal communication strategy, a view also referred to by the PJS, who explained

that in her view there were "crossovers in [interagency programmes], you know

[with an absence in the] delineation of duty" (PJS). The EWO was aware of the

minimal contact between him and the HSCL Coordinator but he saw this as a

positive indication that other services were intervening prior to calling upon the

NEWB:

> Home School Liaison [coordinators] I wouldn't have as much contact but
>
> you would have the odd phone call and you'd do the odd joint visit.
>
> They're more inclined to try it themselves before they'll pass it on to me,
>
> which is fair enough. (EWO 1)

Both Principals were a little unsure about the need for the wide range of

services and shared a view that the rationale behind the Home School Community

Liaison Service should be reviewed as it may have "run its course" (PSS) and its

objective of "bringing in as many parents as we could and they would bring in the

other parents" (PJS) was not working as "the targeted parents are not engaging"

(PJS). There were variations in the purposes of specific roles and in how they

communicated with each other. In spite of everyone applauding the service provided

by the Attendance Monitors, within the remit of the School Completion Programme,

the SCP Local Coordinator identified the lack of feedback from the NEWB as being

regrettable but recognised that within schools there are "so many channels it

[feedback] has to go through, school Principals and Vice-principals and then you'd

be later on, if you like" (SCP Local Coordinator). This perceived distance from the

decisions of the NEWB contradicted the view held by the HSCL Coordinator that the

School Completion Programme focused on attendance and had "a very narrow focus,

to increase the retention rates by such and such" (HSCL Coordinator).

Collaboration with agencies beyond those personnel included in the interviews primarily focused on services for children with behavioural problems. The main agency mentioned was the Health Services Executive (HSE) and the primary discipline mentioned was the Social Work Service. There was agreement among the two Principals that the Social Workers only provided an emergency response service and this implied that "only the extreme cases get dealt with" (PSS). Much frustration was expressed as a result of attempts to contact the Social Workers only to find that "they're changing like the new time, [resulting] in no continuity" (PJS). They both claimed that they could use more direct support from Social Workers with some families, However, the PJS also said that on occasion when she reported concerns to Social Workers this often back fired on her and resulted in the parents accusing her of "ratting on them" as a result of Social Workers "using the data that they've collected from the school" (PJS) by way of rationale for visiting people's homes and voicing concern to parents about their children.

In comparison to these negative views both Principals were very positive about the intervention of "one therapeutic Social Worker" (PJS) from the HSE who "has become invaluable" (PJS) and who often takes "children out of the school (at that moment) for therapeutic work" (PSS). Even though this Social Worker is "not always successful when she tries to engage the parents" (PSS), there was much applause for the "continuity" (PSS) in her role and the efforts made to work with the schools. The VTT however summed up the apparent lack of power felt by schools and other agencies when trying to get families to change existing behaviours when she said:

[Family support] helps but it doesn't solve the problem at the same time. I suppose the parents have to be willing to change themselves and a lot of the time the willingness isn't there. If the willingness is there, I think change might happen. (VTT)

It should be noted that these interviews took place prior to the developments in 2010 which included the amalgamation of the SCP, the HSCL Scheme and the VTT Service with the Educational Welfare Service. In recent months (June 2011) another significant policy change has seen the functions of the NEWB transfer to the newly established Department for Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). The NEWB has welcomed this development as a significant opportunity that "presents as the new Department will focus strongly on harmonising policy issues that affect children in areas such as early childhood care, education and participation, youth justice, child welfare and protection and research" (NEWB, 2011). These changes will be referred to in Chapter 6.

Having discussed the views and experience of those interviewed, this section will outline the fourth theme: recommendations for future practice and policy made by the interviewees for improvement of the implementation of strategies to prevent and intervene with absenteeism at primary level.

Theme 4: Recommendations for Future Practice and Policy

Throughout the interviews respondents suggested changes that could be applied to improve the system of reducing and preventing absenteeism at primary school level. The general consensus was that the overall system should be reviewed

and evaluated and subsequently reformed. The PSS held a view that his experience and that of his colleagues should be captured and utilised to make the system more productive. In the course of our discussions he proposed that the maximum benefit possible is not being obtained from the system as there seems to be a disconnection between the DES, NEWB and the schools. There was recognition that it takes a reasonable amount of time to implement new systems, however, all those interviewed agreed that sufficient time has passed and it is "at the stage now that it needs a review" (PSS). More specific recommendations referred to the implementation of the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) such as the methods of data collection and the age requirement of the legislation. The final recommendations focused on issues such as the responsibility and accountability of parents for ensuring their children attend school at primary level and promotion and information campaigns.

Reform of the Data Collection Systems

It was strongly expressed that "there has to be a more efficient, tidier way" (PJS) in relation to agreeing one method of data collection that could ensure that "the statistics we keep for the school should be the same as the ones for the NEWB" (PJS). This refers to the "antiquated" (PJS) system of the roll book which each school Principal ensured was carefully filled in by the classroom teachers and available for inspection at any time by officials from the DES. The schools also summarised these figures and returned them to the DES in addition to reporting a different set of figures to the NEWB, with different deadline dates. The replacement of the current system by one that would allow for the "majority of the analysis to be

done very easily on some sort of a database, centralised system" (PSS) was called for by all the interviewees. This included a recommendation for a "computerised" (SCP Local Coordinator) system that would ensure one input per student. There was recognition that such a new system would require "time, money, labour, people, all these things and systems that people have to be trained on" (SCP Local Coordinator). Referring to the economic crises at the moment and the unlikely commitment of funds to obtain this centralised system, one of the EWOs referred to "a utopian kind of a way would be if every school had a computerised attendance log in the morning that every pupil just swipes a card at the front door and that could even feed straight into the NEWB" (EWO 1). This could lead to "obviating the need then for the registers, for the returns, the school returns. The whole thing could be done and dusted there and then, every morning and every school day and every school year" (EWO 1).

The kind of categories that are used on the school return forms could also be streamlined according to the PSS. He explained that one of the categories (Appendix F) is a catch all for 'other reasons' that a pupil may have missed a day and includes "a list of maybe ten reasons" (PSS). As some of those explanations include specific reasons such as holidays he would suggest "taking it out of that and (I'd) put in a category of its own because it's a problem now that a lot of children go on holidays inside of school time" (PSS). The other categories that require change, according to this Principal, are those that refer to urgent family reasons such as religious observation and death of a student. He recommended "they sort of break this up a little bit, emigration should be put as holidays on its own" (PSS). His final

suggestion in this section was the need to reform the category that refers to the "transfer to another school, which should really be waiting on, rather than transfer to another school" (PSS). This might clarify that the school is waiting on the notification of transfer and that the student no longer attends this school.

This proposal links to the suggestion that the figures might be more meaningful if they indicated more clearly the students that are no longer actually attending the school when attendance returns are sent in. This point connects with the suggestion made by one of the EWOs that the recording system should identify clearly the extreme situations of some students such as those that have not attended school for the majority of the year due to ongoing court and/or appeal proceedings, etc. If this information allowed the identification of students with chronic absenteeism, the response of the system might be more appropriate. In addition it might then be possible to arrive at attendance figures that are deemed by all as a more accurate reflection of attendance in a specific school at a particular moment in time. In a related point the EWO 2 – Pilot suggested that another referral system should be adopted which would see a referral to the NEWB being accompanied by "a note of concern" and this then being "filtered through some sort of management system down to identify what are the critical cases" (EWO 2 Pilot). This was seen as a way of linking the EWO with the schools and working in an integrated way.

The PJS recommended that the legislation should be amended to apply to all children enrolled in school. This implies that children as young as four or five would be required to attend school on the same basis that currently apply to those over six years. This recommendation is underpinned by an understanding that early childhood

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illness might be a mediating factor in some situations but that the EWO concerned could judge whether or not this was a situation that required intervention. The belief behind this point was that young children should not be allowed to slip under the radar and get off to a bad start in relation to their school attendance. The VTT agreed with this recommendation also and suggested that the age requirement be amended to five years. As mentioned above, all those interviewed indicated that attendance of children at primary level should be the responsibility of the parents. There were some specific recommendations in respect of parents' accountability and potential incentives.

Parents' Accountability and Incentives

Most of the interviewees were of the view that parents should be informed that there are consequences that come into play when they fail to send their children to school. The limitations to the present system of fines were explained by one of the EWOs:

> The discussion that has often taken place is that if parents are not taking the responsibility to ensure that the child attends school the judge is quite limited in what he can impose, there might be probation, there might be a fine, fines have been quite limited so far, I think of one parent who had two children out, hadn't been in school for years, there was a €50 fine. (EWO 2 – Pilot)

Within the context of minor fines and or short prison sentences, many expressed a view that aligning attendance with the welfare provision might be more

appropriate and could have better outcomes for children. Recommendations within this range included linking social welfare payments to school attendance and/or incentivising parents by offering a particular payment subject to school attendance. The general view was that the system should prioritise the rights of the child to attend school over the parents' rights. There was also agreement that this could only happen when all the support services have been utilised and have been proven to be futile. The PSS recommended investigating the possibility of Social Workers being employed directly by schools and working beside teachers with the families to encourage attendance. The final area within the recommendations included information and promotional aspects of school attendance.

Information and Promotion of School Attendance

The view that the NEWB might conduct its own reward system was suggested by one of the EWOs as the focus on "a nationwide basis for pupils who have excellent attendance" (EWO 1) might promote the importance of school attendance. He also said this could be approached through the provision of role models such as sport idols, etc. that would espouse the importance of attending school regularly, by "co-opting celebrities or something like that onto the campaign, a PR campaign, a nationwide stay in school campaign" (EWO 1). He was aware of similar programmes in US that have been very successful and have been operating for a number of years. This was viewed as a possible positive situation for all involved as by including people that "the young people can identify with" through a programme that is "not like endorsing a watch or a brand of aftershave" but rather "a feel good thing as well"(EWO 1), it might become very fashionable to be a good attendee. This latter

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point can be linked with that mentioned earlier by the VTT and the importance of role models within the Traveller community. These recommendations will be integrated within the final chapter of the thesis which will focus on conclusions and recommendations for policy and practice. The next chapter discusses the findings from Phase 1 and 2 and how they integrate and connect with the literature and policy chapters.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to engage in a critical dialogue between the conceptual underpinnings of the study as presented in the literature and policy review chapters and the findings from the data as presented in Chapter 5. As in the other related chapters, the substantive subject of absenteeism is framed by the context of inequality in education and educational disadvantage. The learning from the thesis is discussed by focusing on the prevalence and patterns of absenteeism in the sample schools and the experiences of implementing legislation (Education (Welfare) Act [Government of Ireland, 2000]) and polices to prevent and lessen poor attendance. The discussion leads to the identification of some recommendations which are further developed in Chapter 7.

Prevalence and Patterns of Absenteeism

The findings from the roll books corroborated national figures in relation to the prevalence of absenteeism among some primary school students. The percentage figure of absenteeism for the study sample of 306 students for the year 2006 - 2007 was 10.2%. This figure is similar to Millar's (2010) finding that absenteeism in DEIS Band 1 schools is much more of a concern than in schools, generally. The acute nature of the figures in relation to some children was confirmed through the interviews. Strategies have been put in place to tackle the prevalence of poor attendance. However, disappointment in the apparent lack of improvement in the figures was expressed by the Principal of the Junior School: "Now you see this is

what's been very disappointing. Look our figures [for attendance] have gone down this year from last year with all that we've put into position" (PJS). In my view this disappointment is understandable given the efforts being put into prevention and intervention at school level. There is only so much that can be put in place at the local level which may help individual children. However, the living conditions of families need to be improved at a societal level. The Principal's disappointment mirrors a general acknowledgement within Irish and international literature and policy circles of the stubborn nature of educational inequality. In many ways the frustration at the lack of progress was compounded by the view that, even in times of economic prosperity and increased investment in education, a significant impact has not been made. The current economic recession brings with it particular concerns about how educational disadvantage might be addressed in times of fiscal strain. This is one of the reasons that it is important to explore further the extent and nature of absenteeism.

Absenteeism in the Junior Grades

The roll book figures identified the highest absenteeism among the youngest students; those in the junior (12.2%) and senior (11.8%) infant grades. This is an important finding, particularly as the literature and policy reviews emphasise the importance of a good start in school life (McCoy et al., 2007; Willms, 2003). This finding is of particular concern as attendance is understood as a habitual behaviour. All those interviewed and the learning from research supports the concept of the habitual nature of attendance. It does appear that patterns may develop, if left unchecked and school absenteeism may become a habit and can create a culture

where students are in and out. It is clear that this pattern starts early as the Principal of the Senior School (PSS) explained "that like a lot of these habits, they start early and they only get worse as they go along, so the sooner that they're cut out the better". There can be a serious consequence to this in-and-out culture, particularly in the early years as the pattern becomes the expected behaviour of some children. The figures for the remaining grades (1 to 6) confirms that poor attendance is a problem at all grades in these primary schools.

Absenteeism at Grades 1 to 6

The lowest rate of absenteeism among all grade levels is 8% at 1st grade. The percentage of absenteeism increased again in 2nd grade to 10% and fluctuated around this figure for the remaining grades. The highest rate was almost 11% at 5th grade. The notable trend here is that the figures hover around the school absenteeism figure of 10.2% at every grade after junior and senior infants. This implies consistency among the patterns even though, when further investigated, this is less the case as there is variation between classes at some grades. The range of rates of absenteeism, when each class (from 1 to 6 grades) is examined, is very wide (between 6% to almost 16%). These differences among certain classes at each grade seem to suggest that certain students have very high rates of absenteeism rather than a high rate being spread across a number of students. It is possible that a student's participation in school and motivation to attend is influenced by the teacher/pupil relationship and this factor must be borne in mind when considering the high rates in some classes. This has implications for how strategies are implemented in relation to targeting the

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students with the highest percentage of absenteeism and will be referred to again when discussing the nature of absenteeism.

The perception of problems emerging in the senior grades appears to be linked to concern about transition to post-primary school and the apprehension of associated problems becoming less manageable. All those interviewed, including those whose main focus tends to be on absenteeism at post-primary level, emphasised the importance of watching out for students in grade 5 and 6 and monitoring their attendance, as described by the SCP Local Coordinator: "I would be concerned about any absenteeism from school on any level, but more so [in] 5th and 6th and especially from a secondary school point of view". In addition, the interviewees highlighted the shift in the power dynamic in terms of the students control or agency in whether or not they attended school. Having got into the habit of missing days occasionally, school-refusal was evident at the higher grades as outlined by the EWO:

> A lot of them would've started off in sixth class. That seems to be a
>
> pattern. It's when the child gets to a certain age and begins to, having
>
> learned not to attend or having picked up the bad habits, or habituated to
>
> irregular attendance, the child then turns the tables in terms of the power
>
> dynamic. The child then is said to be in charge in sixth class and starts
>
> refusing to go. (EWO 1)

The perception that the older primary students had enough authority to convince their parents that it was okay to miss school recognises the students' capacity to influence their attendance. Recent research (McCoy et al., 2007; Smyth, Whelan, McCoy, Quail & Doyle, 2010) focused on the connection between students'

attitudes and their academic performance. These understandings underpin the proposition of absenteeism as a more subjective activity, linking to the concept of self-withdrawal. Smyth et al. (2010, p. 85) claimed that the influence "of children's own attitudes and actions can thus reinforce or mitigate the effect of social background factors". There is also a relation with poor socio-economic backgrounds and poverty which have been linked to family issues such as caring for relatives and or younger children. (These issues will be discussed later in this chapter).

Gender and Absenteeism

In discussing the gender analysis of the figures it is important to point out that even though these schools were mixed primary schools they are unusual in that the overall number of boys enrolled was much greater than the number of girls. The results show little difference between boys' and girls' absenteeism but the unusual gender imbalance of the school population should be kept in mind when considering the implications of these figures.

The percentage of absenteeism was fairly similar for boys and girls throughout most of the grades with absenteeism being exactly the same for both boys and girls at two grades (3rd and 4th). The percentage of absenteeism for both genders is very high in both the junior and senior infant grades and also represents the highest rate of absenteeism among all grades, as stated above. The largest differences between the girls and boys can be seen only at 6th grade where girls were absent by 2% more than boys.

As explained, when looking at the figures from grades 1 to 6, the identification of clear consistent patterns within these figures is complicated by closer examination

of the classes at each grade. Where a difference between classes emerged it is a striking difference. In junior infants the percentage of absenteeism of girls is 17. 5% in one class and 7.2% in the other. At 2nd grade the absenteeism for girls in one class is 7.5% and 13.6% in the other. Similarly at 6th grade it is 5.6% in one class and 12% in the other for girls. In relation to the boys it is only at 6th grade that the difference between the classes is large at 6.1% and 15.7%. When combining both the girls and the boys in each class it is only one grade (6th) that has a marked difference between the percentage of absenteeism for boys and girls; class 2 has very high rates of absenteeism for both genders (12% for girls and 15.7% for boys). These findings require further investigation to understand the nature of the differences; however, it does appear that the extreme absenteeism of some children is evident all the way through the primary school grades.

All the interviewees concurred that even though the general perception and understanding from research is that boys are absent more often than girls, this did not represent their overall experience or the findings in this study, in relation to poor attendance at primary school. It is important to note that emphasis was placed on the cultural aspect of some girls' education, especially in relation to students from Roma or Traveller background. Many of the interviewees perceived that education for girls isn't seen as a priority among these minorities as: "Well [Traveller] girls more so because girls, I don't know, I think there's some sort of militating trend, I don't know, I'm not an expert, but the education of girls in area x is not considered as perhaps significant as boys" (EWO 1). This view point is particularly interesting given the possible explanation for the gender imbalance that was outlined by the

PSS. He said that many parents choose to send their daughters to nearby all-girl

schools mainly because of the perception held by parents, in his opinion, that: "if

you're going to have more boys you're going to have more problems" (PSS). This

latter response indicates that parents are making a considered choice in relation to

their children's primary education when they have the capacity to do so.

The education of girls must also be considered in the context of disadvantage

in the family. Girls were often referred to as the potential carer in the family,

particularly of younger children. Where this was the case, both generally and within

the Travelling community, it was noted that girls regularly missed school and that

this appeared to be with parental consent. It is possible that the gender imbalance in

the schools was having an impact on the participation and attendance of girls. This

connects with the general point about the effect of the behaviour and attitudes of

some on the participation of others students. Notwithstanding the unusual gender

population of these schools, this research indicates that there may be gender-specific

factors that need to be understood and researched further in relation to poor

attendance in primary school.

Patterns of Absenteeism: Mondays and Fridays

Another important finding was that absenteeism on Fridays was extremely high

in the roll book figures (14.5%), with Mondays recorded as the next highest

percentage (11.2%). This was of no surprise to the interviewees. There was

acknowledgment that, in spite of the schools adopting a range of intervention

strategies, this pattern remains stubborn and hard to shift. However, there was very

little factual information about why this might be the case. There also appears to be

limited focus on this aspect within the literature even though it is a problem that can have serious implications for the students that are attending school for either three or four days within a possible five-day week.

It is worth noting the HSCL Coordinator's comment that the students who tended to miss days here and there, including Mondays and Fridays, were of most concern to him. He explained that "....it's that group, I don't know, 20% mightn't be the right figure, who are missing a day a week, sometimes two days a week as they tended to be a small group" that are the children with the highest absenteeism and miss days regularly, throughout the year. He made a distinction between these students and those that might be miss a day, occasionally, for sickness or a family occasion which would usually be explained by the parents. The roll books figures seem to corroborate the view that a small group of children with very high absenteeism can influence the behaviour of other students attending the same school. This is further substantiation of the importance of directing additional supports towards the schools with the highest levels of disadvantage and/or high levels of absenteeism, as pointed out in recent research and policy analysis initiatives (Archer, 2001; Archer & Weir, 2005; DES, 2011, Sofroniou, Archer & Weir, 2004). The findings in this study contribute to the differentiation between *occasional, habitual* and *block* absenteeism; the patterns in the roll books in relation to the time of the year also provide information about these students.

Patterns of Absenteeism: September to June

The findings from the roll books show that the percentage of absenteeism rose continuously between September (6.7%) to June (15.5%) in the 2006/2007 school

year. They also indicate other significant increases at holiday periods such as Christmas. The figure for June is particularly high and can be associated with families availing of cheaper holidays than they might in the school holiday months of July and August. These results were of no surprise to the interviewees as they were aware of the steady increase from September to June and the clustering at holiday periods as described by the EWO: "....obviously in September and October you'll have a few problems and then things start to get better. There's a definite dip in December, January, February" (EWO 1). The finding that attendance from the beginning of the new school year in September is relatively high is worth noting as it represents a positive start for most students. The fact that this trend faded as the year progressed, despite strategies to curtail this from happening, needs attention. The issue of taking children out of school for holidays was usually the reason for block absenteeism and was seen as a big trend by all the interviewees: "....certainly there would be a good few who would take two weeks in June or two weeks in September" (PJS). However, the Principal also expected that: "....the figure will also go down now. You know in the present economic climate people may not be taking as many continental holidays".

Impact of Disadvantage on Primary School Education

The high percentage of absenteeism in the sample DEIS schools is confirmation of the connection between educational disadvantage, social exclusion and poverty (Archer, 2001; CPA, 2003; Daly & Leonard, 2002; DES, 2005a; Downes & Gilligan, 2007; Kelleghan et al., 1995; Smyth & McCoy, 2009; SVP, 2002). The connection between educational disadvantage and poor attendance has

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been reinforced through the interviews. These next sections explore the impact of out-of-school and in-school factors on absenteeism as understood by the interviewees and the policy and literature reviews.

Out-of-school Factors

There was much recognition of the difficult circumstances many of the students were living in: "I think poor attendance would be linked with disadvantage and dysfunctional families" (VTT). The understanding that families are trying to cope with very chaotic lives was the reason why many of the respondents felt that getting a child to school can be difficult as: "They're just very often struggling to cope with now" (HSCL Coordinator).

The impact of living in poverty on children, as described by the HSCL Coordinator, highlights the difficulties some families live with and the inevitable consequences for school attendance: "In a disadvantaged family where things are very bad, very often children are embarrassed about coming to school because they don't have the proper uniform, because they're not clean and because there's a head lice issue". He also explained that the children were often dealing with very complex problems at home and found it very difficult to cope at school. The reality of living with poverty and low income often meant that "they mightn't have been given a breakfast" (SCP Local Coordinator). Food poverty was also highlighted and linked to poor attendance in the study by Downes, Maunsel and Ivers, (2006) when 18% of 6th class children self-reported being hungry. Difficult home environments were often due to parents' illness or addiction-related problems. This was linked to family

difficulties which appeared to relate to changing family structures as well as the existence of alcohol or drug problems:

> Some parents are just not capable of getting themselves up in the morning, never mind getting their children up. So you get a dysfunction in the family structure. You might have illness as well actually, another factor. Parents could be ill. Family members could be ill. This could be related to alcohol or drugs as well. (EWO 1)

The perceived change in family structures was linked to the needs of young lone parents and the strain often placed on grandparents to get children to school: "you have grandchildren living with the grandparents because the parent is very, very young and what is happening is that the age of the mother and the father is dropping significantly" (HSCL Coordinator). These responses indicated a level of empathy and understanding about the difficult circumstances that many families are coping with and why it often can be so difficult to ensure that young children attend school. However, it appears that in spite of this knowledge there is little understanding about how these disadvantaged circumstances may be mediated so that young vulnerable children can benefit from better school attendance. There appeared to be little emphasis on the parents' difficulties and what barriers they might have to overcome to ensure their children benefited from access to school. Even though there was an acceptance of the need to tackle educational disadvantage there appeared to be little analysis about what might be needed to address the wider social deprivation issues but rather an acceptance that this is the way it is.

The outlook that difficult home backgrounds are the main determinants for perpetuating poor attendance is challenged by Reid (2006) through his research. He found that there were wide variations in attendance rates between schools, even schools located in similar catchment areas. Reid further argued that "while social class and pupil intake factors may on occasion account for some of these differences, there are undoubtedly a range of within-school factors which are also highly significant" (p.42). This understanding could be helpful in exploring the variation in rates between some classes, at the same grade and at other grades, within the same schools.

As stated in the literature review, the understanding of educational disadvantage as advanced by Kellaghan et al. (1995) and in the Green Paper (Government of Ireland, 1992), the Education Convention (Coolahan, 1994) and Educational Disadvantage Forum (2002) as a culmination of both in-school and out-of-school experiences led to many targeted approaches focusing on equality of access, opportunity and outcomes. The most recent is the DEIS action plan which was seen as a step towards a more comprehensive approach with equality within education as a clear objective. However, the call from many sources for a move away from the deficit theories of disadvantage towards embracing a rights-based approach to education does not seemed to have impacted on the views of many of the interviewees in this research. Some of the responses to the interviews as outlined above indicate a view that educational disadvantage will always be there no matter what initiatives are put in place. In my view shifting these views might be assisted by dialogue about the implications of a rights-based approach to educational

disadvantage as recommended by the Educational Disadvantage Committee (2005) and Zappone (2002). Debate in relation to the proposed referendum for constitutional change to protect children in their own right and not indirectly through their parents also offers an opportunity to consider what a rights-based approach might entail. The possibility of changing the dynamic from a state/family relationship to a state/child one as proposed by Kilkelly (2010) could be transformative in terms of responsibility and accountability in education. The findings in relation to the views that parents are responsible for their children's absenteeism is a further indication that this debate needs to take place.

Parents Condoning Poor Attendance

Parents were seen as an important factor in poor attendance by the interviewees. Parents were seen to be either implicitly or explicitly allowing their child to miss school as: "not only is the child missing school but they're being allowed to do so. And even when the parent is informed the parent hasn't got either the ability or the level of concern to actually change that pattern" (SCP Local Coordinator). This outlook corroborates views that are emphasised in the literature in relation to school authorities identifying the out-of-school factors such as the home environment (Atkinson et al., 2000; Malcolm et al., 2003 & Reid, 1999, 2002). The views, expressed in the interviews, were often contradictory and varied. An example is apparent in other views of the SCP Local Coordinator in relation to the role of parents. Her views ranged from seeing parents as not interested: "parents thinking maybe wouldn't' bother ... too much hassle" to being unaware: "sure they'll catch up, it's no harm" or being apologetic: "I hate taking them out of school. I'm sorry

they're missing such and such and they're nearly apologising to you" (SCP Local Coordinator).

The connection being made by the responses between parents' effect on their children's attendance and the age of the student is worth a further mention here. Many explained that primary school students, especially those in the earlier grades, are more dependent on adults to ensure that they are brought to school, whereas when they get older they often have more influence on the parents' decision to allow them to miss school. There was also a view (EWO & SCP Local Coordinator) that this changes the dynamic in the family and students, especially those in 5th and 6th grade can be more strong-willed and might insist that they don't want to go to school.

Contrary to this blaming of parents there was also recognition of the reaction of shock and disappointment by parents when they were contacted to say that their children had missed twenty days: "I see that such and such a child is 30 or 40 days absent, and when I say to the parents they're 30 to 40 days absent, they can't believe it, because a day here or a day there, they don't notice it" (VTT). This was viewed as an indication that the parents were not deliberately condoning the children's absence. However, the knowledge about reaching the 20-day threshold did not always result in changed behaviour on behalf of the student or the parents. This, in turn, often further frustrated the school personnel involved. There is a definite need for educationalists to engage with parents in the search for understanding about poor attendance. This engagement could foster partnership between parents and educationalists. Exposure of the school and agency personnel to what Malcolm et al. (2003) found when

searching for causal factors could be beneficial. These researchers found that whilst most parents think it is important that children attend school regularly, parents perceived the main cause of non-attendance to be in-school factors such as bullying, problems with teachers and peer pressure.

In-school Factors

Researchers' perspectives have linked other in-school factors with non-attendance such as academic achievement, delivery of the curriculum, discipline issues and teacher expectations (Ofsted, 2001; Smyth, 1999; Smyth et al. 2004). Other Irish research, already discussed in relation to students' direct experience and attitudes (McCoy et al., 2007; Smyth et al., 2010), also supports the need for highlighting these factors.

The responses from the interviewees indicate a range of views on this issue. These include a view that in-school issues are rare at primary school and are usually dealt with promptly as seen here: "[Bullying or problems with teachers] are not so much in primary school, generally speaking" (EWO 1) and "....very short term you would come across stuff like that, illness, bullying, not getting on with a friend in school, talking to her friends, you know" (SCP Local Coordinator). The idea that these issues are dealt with promptly was explained by the PSS and linked with parents' insistence that something should be done: "I find they'd [parents] be up very quickly if they feel that the teacher's being unfair or they don't like the teacher. I'd hear about that very quickly. Usually that's usually resolved. It's rarely an ongoing issue" (PSS).

However, the HSCL Coordinator explained that finding out what might be upsetting a young student can be difficult as often they may: "not be able to articulate why he or she was upset even though you know something was preventing him from going to school, but they weren't able to explain either to me or the parent exactly what it was" (HSCL Coordinator). He explained that absenteeism can be caused by something that happened in school such as: "...with the teacher we'll say with their own class teacher, with another teacher, with a child in the class, with another child from another class" or "...it could be something very simple that they hadn't their homework done and they were worried about it or it could be something very major that there was an ongoing bullying issue that we weren't aware of" (HSCL Coordinator). One of the EWOs explained that sometimes the school can feel they have dealt with the problem but that may not satisfy the parents who remain concerned about the vulnerability of their child:

> Bullying would often be presented as a reason for being out of school, the schools themselves would insist that they themselves have, looked at it, reviewed it, kept an eye on the kid, but it doesn't necessarily always satisfy the parents that the child is protected and free from the bully but bullying is so subtle (EWO 2 Pilot).

These findings highlight the need for further exploration of in-school factors and their possible implications for student engagement and withdrawal from school.

The Nature of Absenteeism

The findings in this research study support the understanding that certain students develop a routine of missing too much school from the beginning of their school life. As already mentioned the interviewees cited concern about the students that were missing regularly. However, there was some discrepancy in the understandings as the block absenteeism pattern was being blamed for skewing the figures yet the high rate of absenteeism on Fridays and Mondays indicates a habitual pattern. This is further evidence of the need to focus the data gathering on the patterns of specific students and the reasons they are missing so many days and why. There appears to be a growing understanding among all the interviewees of the need for this detailed information. The habitual patterns of poor attendance can be directly linked with early prevention.

Early Risk Factors: Habitual Absenteeism

The interviewees were strong in their belief that the most vulnerable young children are identifiable upon starting school and that the early risk factors as described by Willms (2003) are evident to a number of key personnel. The sense that: "...history repeats itself" (HSCL Coordinator) was shared by all but was expressed as a frustration and desire to shift this pattern by the HSCL Coordinator as follows: "You can't generalise totally but very often it's the same families, the older brother, the older sister now somebody else comes along and boom, it's the same thing on attendance, they're missing" (HSCL Coordinator). This respondent, like the Principal of the Junior School had a long history in the school and was disappointed

that the patterns of poor attendance seemed to be continuing from older siblings to much younger children:

> Now it could be three, four, five children later in the same family and you just see the things being repeated with what happened with the eldest and the second eldest. And in some cases then, as the children or as there are more children the, difficulties are more extreme. (HSCL Coordinator)

These sentiments, corroborated in the literature and policy reviews, are linked to the perception that poor attendance usually starts from a young age and has a long-term nature. There is evidence that there is an informal focus on attendance at the junior grades as: "We have got people on our lists that are targeted from Senior Infants" (SCP Local Coordinator).

However, there appeared to be some contradictory messages about the role of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as referred to by the Principal of the Junior School and the HSCL Coordinator. The PJS explained that even though they had an Early Start Programme in the school it could not cater of all the students that can be enrolled in the junior infants' classes. This meant that they regularly enrolled students that came from nearby playgroups and a day nursery. The HSCL Coordinator explained that parents often choose to send their child to the ECCE services rather than to the Early Start Programme due to the longer hours that are available in those services. It is interesting to note this latter view and the fact that there is such a high percentage of absenteeism in the junior grades. It would be necessary to record attendance at the Early Start Programme and compare with attendance in the nearby ECCE services in order to investigate whether or not there

is a similar trend as that seen in the primary school. This could be very enlightening about the parents' views of the service provided by the schools.

This is an example of where policy intention needs to be examined as the implementation can cause unintended consequences. The introduction of the Early Start Pilot Programme in 1994 and subsequent policies such as the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999) has helped to focus on the importance of early years' education. However, the layering of policy initiatives without due regard to implementation can stifle progress and often leads to abandoning certain aims. An example of this is the initial plan to include an early childhood education element in DEIS which now appears to have been dropped (NESF, 2009). However, this might be the correct approach given that other developments such as the *Early Years Education Policy Unit* in 2005 in the DES and co-located in the OMC was established to oversee the development of early year's education policy and initiatives (OMC, 2005).

The findings in this study show disconnect between early intervention strategies at ECCE and at primary school levels. As previously stated, there is a willingness shown by all involved to target the attendance of young children. This is clearly stated in the pilot project of NEWB which: "recognises the role of schools in early intervention" and implied that the school might provide the most appropriate early response to young children with poor attendance (2009, p.2). If this role is to be developed in a coherent and helpful way than it is essential for schools to collaborate locally with ECCE providers.

There is an opportunity to build on possible collaboration through the focus on integration outlined in the Department's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) and the alignment of functions with the new DCYA (June, 2011). In addition, the early evaluation results of DEIS by the ERC and the Inspectorate (DES, 2011) point to a willingness on behalf of the schools to embrace the School Support Programme and to undertake whole school planning. Providing for the needs of young children and their families could benefit from a sharing of perspectives and understandings in relation to roles and responsibilities to intervention and prevention at the early years. Best approaches to assist this process could be considered under the school planning process under DEIS.

Block Absenteeism

Focusing in on the *block* nature of absenteeism raised other perspectives including views that this pattern is associated with the behaviour of families that are not originally from Ireland. Many of the students attending the schools were from ethnic minority backgrounds such as the Roma people or from Poland. The general consensus among the interviewees was that the students whose families came to Ireland from these countries were very likely to be poor school attendees and regularly took blocks of time off for return visits to their country of origin. However, the HSCL Coordinator believed that Polish families were usually good attendees and: "They're here for a purpose. They're here to work, they're focused on that. Very often they're quite well educated, and the children are …very often will be doing well in school because they'll be motivated at home" (HSCL Coordinator). In addition the Principal explained that compulsory education doesn't begin in Poland

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until the age of six and she linked this with parents' lack of priority of sending the young children to school. However, compulsory school in Ireland is six years too and the majority of children enrol by the age of five so it is difficult to make judgements about why some of the children whose families' first language may not be English are generally seen to be poor attendees.

Children from the Traveller community also attended these schools but their enrolment was declining sharply in recent years due to a closure of a nearby halting site. It is worth noting the strong view that the Traveller children were well integrated and their pattern of attendance was now very similar to the rest of the population. However, on occasion the school experienced Traveller students that were living in difficult circumstances and or had nomadic lifestyles. The latter often resulted in very poor attendance of the students involved. There also seemed to be an understanding that Traveller students might miss days for family occasions and or religious ceremonies and that this was usually explained by the family and accepted by the school.

Some of the responses in relation to the Traveller children displayed a lot of contradictions. On the one hand there was a belief that cultural differences (attending family occasions such as funerals and weddings and religious ceremonies) were the main reasons for the occasional days off as the EWO outlined: "again a real casualness about getting the children in. Children are taken out at particular times of the year" (EWO 2 Pilot). However, it was also said that there appeared to be less differentiation between Traveller children and other children in terms of the pattern of absenteeism and that their overall attendance has greatly improved in recent years.

However, some of the respondents (School Principals and SCP Coordinator) strongly associated the lack of improvement in the attendant figures in recent years with either the non-Irish national children or with the Traveller children with a nomadic lifestyle. The PJS referred to some of the figures she was compiling for 2007/2008 and she explained that these figures were proof that "the foreign nationals now would have a huge effect on our absentee rate" (PJS). She explained that out of 10 pupils that had over 20 days absent by February 2008; 5 were from families that had moved to Ireland and 3 were Travellers. She also supported strongly the need to further investigate these trends by a system of identification of students and their individual attendance patterns.

Multilateral Responsibility for Attendance

Responsibility for Early School Participation

As already explained all the interviewees expressed both concern for the percentage of absenteeism among the infant classes and a strong desire to improve attendance. A vast number of strategies were put in place over the past few years, many of which focused on young children. However, there was also what appears to be reluctance on behalf of the schools to intervene directly with families in relation to absenteeism. This role was viewed as the responsibility of the NEWB. Interestingly, this view also existed among some of the support services. Therefore, there appears to be a real need to clarify the guidelines and role and responsibilities of all the personnel involved. The recent amalgamation of the main (educational) support services with NEWB provides an opportune time to undertake this work.

The fact that the legislation (Education (Welfare) Act [Government of Ireland, 2000]) only applies to students from the age of six was viewed as a weakness in the implementation, as expressed by the VTT:

> I have a child on my case load at the moment who is five and her
> attendance is terrible. But intervention cannot be made by the NEWB
> because she's five. I don't think [there's anything else that can be done]
> so, no. We can talk to them and encourage them. (VTT)

The EWO linked early intervention with the role of the schools as this response shows:

> Well, I suppose some schools ask me about following up on particular
> kids who are under six and my hands are tied, you know but I have said
> to them that it is important that you would have informed parents if there
> is any concerns, you know because as soon as they hit six they might be
> on to me again. (EWO 2 Pilot)

These responses show that there is a need to be very clear about protocols for intervention and the need to engage in discussion about changing roles and responsibilities, particularly when new legislation and policies are enacted. The PJS was the interviewee most exercised by this issue and she argued very strongly that it should be specified in the legislation that the responsibility to ensure a child, under the age of six, attended school should rest with the NEWB and that the legislation should be amended to this effect. She identified the current position of the legislation as making it harder to impress on parents that all students should attend

all of the time as: "....the fact that the parents are aware that until six years old, [they know] they're not going to be reported to the National Welfare Board" (PJS). Even though she did explain that the EWO she worked with is sympathetic towards her concern for four and five year olds she understood that his capacity to respond was limited by the often more urgent situations on his caseload (usually students at post-primary level).

This raises the issue of the lack of resources or the imbalance caused by the EWOs having to prioritise perceived urgent situations, usually involving post-primary students. She explained that: "the welfare officers at the moment will tell you that they've so much at the upper end that they wouldn't have the time to be going hunting after four-year-olds" (PJS). There are two questions arising from these views: 1) What is the responsibility of the school towards ensuring that infants attend school upon enrolment, and 2) Is early intervention given the priority that it needs (even from age six years) within the NEWB? These questions are fundamental to embracing a policy of prevention and early intervention as they connect to the identification of early learning difficulties as pointed out by Rowe and Rowe (1992). They also build upon the literature that espouses the importance of engaging students in school life at infant grades before the curriculum becomes further complicated and advanced as argued by Willms (2003).

It is my view that the school and other support services could hold the key to this early intervention stage but they need to operate within a system that helps to clarify expectations and roles. It may not always be the role of someone else but may be within the remit of those closest to the problem to intervene. The findings from

the NEWB (2009) pilot project point to a commitment towards working in a multidisciplinary practice with clear criteria for case management etc. These developments could be assisted by modern up-to-date electronic systems that would be of benefit and assist communication to all involved.

<center>Integrated Systems of Response to Poor Attendance</center>

The apparent success of the system of Attendance Monitors as acknowledged, particularly by the School Principals, SCP Coordinator and the EWO, is an example of a strategy that appears to be working well. However, there does not seem to be a mechanism for evaluation or review in terms of impact on poor attendance. The Principals explained how this was of a practical assistance to them in reviewing the daily attendance of their students. There was recognition that the additional resources (supplied by the SCP) assisted Principals by highlighting actual attendance and by alerting parents and students that non-attendance was taken very seriously. The system adopted by the Attendance Monitor was aimed at providing up-to-date information on each child's attendance. Interestingly it appears that the system applied by the Attendance Monitor requires an additional administrative task for the classroom teachers: "she takes the attendance every day, not according to the Roll book. She sends out a sheet to the teachers" (PJS). The Attendance Monitor also prepared letters to be sent home when a student missed too many days and alerted the Principal if the EWO was due to be contacted (if 20 days were missed). There was also evidence in the interviews that much effort was put into blending this approach with other school-based strategies such as specific incentives and reward systems.

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Despite acknowledgement of these positives, a certain amount of confusion in relation to clarity of roles was evident in the interviews and was deemed to effect intervention with families. Both of the School Principals understood the role of the HSCL Coordinator as not having a direct function with attendance; however, they both perceived that the programme needed to be reviewed in light of the shifts and changes within the overall system. The HSCL Coordinator was clear that his formal remit was not to be directly involved in attendance but rather to support children's attendance through involvement with their parents. He also explained that he only had irregular contact with the EWO which was not based on any agreed division of responsibilities. As outlined in the DES Guidelines (2005/6), the emphasis on supporting parents is aimed at indirectly supporting whole-child development. The Guidelines also provide examples of HSCL Coordinators being very active in relation to developing attendance strategies, with the participation of parents. As it appears that there is flexibility in the Guidelines for priorities to be agreed locally there is scope for various interpretations of the objectives and principles of the scheme. In light of the shifting of roles and responsibilities and the move towards a more integrative way of supporting families (NEWB, 2009), it could be timely to review the Guidelines of the inter-connected support programmes.

The SCP Coordinator also referred to the lack of direct contact between her service and the EWO. There was evidence of a lot of frustration and lack of clarity in terms of intervention with a family when a concern about a student's attendance arises. This was not only in relation to education services but also in relation to child protection as there appeared to be a lack of connection between the schools and the

general social work service and very little understanding about the role of other professionals that might be working with particular families. The therapeutic social worker was seen as an exception to this and her role was seen as making a valuable contribution to supporting families. It was interesting to note here that this service appeared to work directly with the schools and that this aspect of the role was welcomed.

The lack of clarity about who is in contact with whom and what is the actual system of intervention was evident in the interviews. It was interesting that the EWOs viewed it as a positive if issues could be tackled locally by the support services or the schools themselves; however, this view did not match the perspective of those involved in the school or services and was the cause of much criticism. There was an overwhelming sense that the responsibility for students' not attending school belonged to someone else and the additional layer of support services merely further exacerbated this. It is unclear what mechanisms are there to coordinate the school services and to ensure that agreed protocols are in place and are operational.

The commitment of the NEWB (2009) to standardise educational welfare practice and to include clear protocols for support services' contact with families is a significant beginning towards joined up, collaborative systems. This alignment should not only concern the support services that are linked directly to schools but should also align with those services that are operated under the Health Service Executive (HSE), such as Social Workers, Speech and Language Therapists and Public Health Nurses. These latter services are currently being transferred to a new Agency for Children and Families within the newly formed DCYA. If there is a

serious intention to improve the implementation of prevention and early intervention in relation to primary school attendance it is essential that the NEWB has very clear links with the new agency and the Department and supports clear local strategies of multi-dimensional intervention and prevention.

Lessening Inequality in Education

The disappointment expressed in this research by all involved with the stubborn nature of educational disadvantage can be linked to the theoretical understandings mentioned in the literature review. It is clear that it is not possible to settle the problem of inequality in education simply through an internal solution (Lynch, 2005; Baker et al., 2009). Improving access to opportunity which has been the focus of many policies and initiatives has not resulted in the gains that were being sought. The focus on access to education as a right has resulted in the provision of a state funded system of education. However, without embracing the wider social and economic inequalities it does not address inequality in educational outcomes. This links with Sen's diversities of well-being and has certain connections with *equality of condition* as expanded by Baker (2005). The initiatives that are being put in place need to be underpinned by open dialogue which addresses the fundamental inequality that exists in Irish society. This discourse calls for the inclusion of what Sen (1973) refers to as basic and often competing rights and the implications of political decisions on the type of society we are striving to create.

The role of broader inequality in society (CPA, 2003) in perpetuating inequality in education needs to be the focus of open discussion so that the underlining issues are understood. In the absence of this recognition of social,

political and economic inequalities it is not surprising that *resistance* as described by

Fagan (1995) is linked to participation and attendance at school. As already

indicated, some of the interviewees in this research expressed the view that some of

the parents of children with poor attendance did not value the importance of

education. In the view of some of the professionals interviewed this lack of

appreciation of the system of education resulted from the fact that the system itself is

developed and delivered through a middle class lens. While the interviewees had

empathy with the difficulties associated with living in circumstances of disadvantage,

however, there was little recognition by them of the power imbalances that exist

within society and what role the current education system plays in perpetuating this

imbalance.

A key to assisting change could be through a focus on the capabilities

approach, as outlined by Sen (1997), as it could dovetail with the whole-child focus

of the school action plans and the plans for integrative services. This builds upon the

view of Unterhalter, outlined in Chapter 2, that there is merit in sociologists of

education integrating Sen's capability approach into their analysis. Sen:

"...consistently [arguing] through all his writings about the importance of public

participation and dialogue and therefore the need for any framework of thinking to be

open enough to be utilised in diverse settings" (Unterhalter, 2003, p. 666). Sen's

concentration on an approach rather than a theory is designed to assist the flexibility

by which it can be applied in different contexts. In my view, Sen's explanation of the

difference between functionings and capabilities provides a lens by which to further

interrogate the basic rights of all children to education and to explore the potential of

engagement and meaningful participation. It is clear from the literature on absenteeism that putting in place special initiatives to tackle poor attendance has not resulted in the positive changes that are being sought. The fact that poor attendance can vary from school to school in the same neighbourhood and between class to class, as highlighted in this research, shows that there is a need to understand more about the student's agency and willingness or otherwise to participate in school. The capabilities approach could allow for an investigation of the link between what the student values doing and being. According to Unterhalter (2003, p. 667), the "agency and freedom to make up one's mind about schooling as a valued end and [to] convert one's aspirations regarding schooling into valued achievements lie at the heart of Sen's capability approach and distinguish it from other positions".

This approach might assist the schools and other support providers to focus with greater clarity on what each child needs to reach their potential within the education system and might assist the empowerment experienced by people trying to tackle inequality at school level. Assistance with understanding this approach through interdisciplinary training in critical dialogue is further discussed in the next chapter along with the conclusions and recommendations based on the learning from this research project.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter aims to draw conclusions from the main findings of the inquiry

and to make recommendations for improvements in practice, research and policy. As

explained in the introductory chapter this is a small scale case study into a

phenomenon that is multidimensional and requires a multifaceted response. The

interdisciplinary approach to the investigation aimed to address this complexity

through the application of a theoretical analysis of inequality in education and

educational disadvantage and by tracing education policy through the social policy

context as well as drawing on the research as reported in Chapter 5.

As outlined in the research rationale, the prevalence of poor attendance at

primary level in schools located in an area designated as disadvantaged was deemed

to warrant a disciplined inquiry. The enactment of the Education (Welfare) Act

(Government of Ireland, 2000) signalled a serious attempt to introduce

comprehensive policies to stem absenteeism as part of the objective of providing for:

"the entitlement of every child in the state to a certain minimum education" (p.5).

The Act has implications for a number of people, including students, parents and

staff in the numerous agencies with statutory responsibilities for children's well

being. It has met with some success in implementation during the subsequent decade

and has changed the landscape of interventions in relation to school attendance.

Changes have also taken place over the past decade in relation to educational

disadvantage and school attendance.

A Decade Later: Time for Reflection

Commissioning a formal review through an external evaluation of the work of the NEWB, given its remit under the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) is the primary recommendation arising from this study. The rationale for this recommendation is based on the understanding that an overall review has not taken place since the establishment of the NEWB, even though there has been some incremental changes in the strategies adopted by the DES, NEWB, schools and many support services since implementation began. There has not been an opportunity to review the systems or evaluate its impact. This review should be undertaken within the broader context of the aspirations of the social partnership programme *Towards 2016* (Government of Ireland, 2006), ' to review the commitment to integration and joined-up interdepartmental planning, at all levels. It is essential to identify the strengths and weaknesses in relation to implementation of an inclusive first class education system as outlined in legislation (for example, the Education (Welfare) Act [Government of Ireland, 2000] and the Education Act [Government of Ireland, 1998]).

In addition, the findings from this study highlight the need for further research on students' poor attendance, particularly at primary level. This recommendation concurs with the proposal by McCoy et al. (2007) that an empirical research project in the Irish context exploring the nature of poor attendance is required. According to McCoy et al. (2007) such a study could provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of issues surrounding school attendance in Irish schools. A research project, of this kind, could systematically consider concepts such as compulsion and

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consent; parentally-condoned absence; self-withdrawal and school disengagement and draw on international and Irish knowledge of educational disadvantage and poor school attendance.

The proposed external evaluation research project should include a focus on which young students miss school and why they miss school. There needs to be a specific focus on those students with patterns of significant habitual poor attendance and should include gender analysis and class/grade differences. In relation to the patterns of habitual poor attendance, there is a need for a better understanding on why so many young children miss school on Fridays and/or Mondays and why levels of attendance fall away from September to June.

Linked to this investigation would be an exploration of the understanding, views and perceptions relating to poor attendance of young children and their parents. Their voices could be critical in explaining why students miss so much school and in designing strategies for meaningful intervention. As other projects that have prioritised the voice of the child within the NCS (DHC, 2000) have discovered, a focus on such a critical aspect of children's lives through direct engagement with young students, could be transformative in terms of learning and knowledge acquisition. This could also be undertaken within a contextual review of the implications of the proposed constitutional amendment on children's rights.

In summary, a comprehensive review should include: (a) a formal external evaluation of the work of the NEWB; (b) an empirical research project in the Irish context exploring the nature and specific extent of poor attendance: (c) consultation with the students with poor attendance patterns and their parents; and (d) evaluation

of support services that impact on school attendance. The latter could complement the review of the SSP component of DEIS, (ERC), by focusing on implementation issues such as agreed protocols and the roles and responsibilities for all involved in the provision of an educational welfare service. The next recommendation concerns the identification of early risk factors as it is the critical point of intervention for successful outcomes.

<p style="text-align:center;">Positive Beginnings: Improving Early Participation</p>

The finding that absenteeism was at its peak in the infant classes is a serious one and needs immediate attention. It is clear that these young children are identifiable upon starting school and that the risk factors as described by Willms (2003) are evident to a number of key personnel. The concern among the respondents confirms that this pattern needs urgent addressing to curb the development of a habitual pattern of poor attendance and an in-and-out culture. These sentiments, corroborated in the literature and policy reviews, were linked to the perception that poor attendance usually starts at a young age and has a long-term nature.

These findings support the current policy focus on early intervention and prevention which has the objective of implementing high quality early years services for all children. It is proposed that in addition to the free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), available since 2010, there should be an additional year of ECCE provision targeted at children in areas designated as disadvantaged. The intention should be to provide opportunities for children to benefit from high quality early years intervention prior to attending primary school. Inclusion in high quality childcare services has the potential to give the most

vulnerable children a smooth transition to primary school. If a high quality service has engaged well with parents they too could be assisted to ensure that their children transfer to primary school with all the necessary supports. The positive outcomes of this provision could be multi-faceted and include benefits for the children, parents and schools.

There needs to be an alignment between policies that emphasise early intervention before and in primary school. The recent developments in relation to quality provision include Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006); and Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). Both frameworks aim to improve the quality of children's early experiences across a diverse range of settings for children. In line with these developments and to ensure that all children benefit from quality early years' provision it is essential that policy and practice initiatives aimed at early intervention are aligned. Consideration should be given to review the minimum age of enrolment for primary school (currently four years) and the age of legal requirement to attend school (currently six years). If, following this review, both ages were the same, for example, five years, this could assist the development of clear policies and interventions.

The responses to the interviews highlighted the empathy expressed towards parents and particularly young parents whom it was perceived often had difficulty in getting their child to school. This understanding could be built upon to develop the care/support focus that is possible at the infant stage. The support should focus on the need of some parents of assistance in getting their young child to school. Aistear's

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(NCCA, 2009) inclusion of the teachers of infant classes provides the ideal platform for this development. The focus within Aistear on partnership between parents and practitioners (including teachers) provides a blueprint for the development of a mutually respectful relationship that values what the other does and says and recognises responsibility on both sides.

To ensure clarity of early intervention the revision of protocols for the delivery of a comprehensive educational welfare service should differentiate between intervention at a very young age and when the student is at post-primary level. As envisioned in the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000), the weighting in relation to the beginning school child should be on the roles and responsibilities of those already in close contact with the families. There should be an implicit reluctance on everyone's part to directly involve the EWO to intervene with families of infant children unless other more local avenues have been tried and seen not to have succeeded. This would ensure that the schools recognise their responsibilities and value their own role in a school/community response to the needs of children and their families. This work could be undertaken or complemented by a re-visioning of the role of the HSCL Coordinator as a key support for the parents involved.

The school's direct involvement could be more meaningful and less threatening to parents of young children and change the dynamics of school attendance. However, there may be occasions when the EWO is the correct person to intervene. If this is the case the EWO should have particular expertise in responding to absenteeism at the early intervention stage of young students' lives.

There are some easy measures that could be immediately implemented that would have positive outcomes for all involved concerning data collection.

Reform of the Data Collection Systems

As pointed out, there was much frustration in relation to the lack of alignment of the various sets of figures that schools are required to supply to the NEWB and the DES. The current system operates with different deadline dates and criteria for collection. This is within a system that lacks a national primary school database. The development of a Primary School database is the first step towards introducing a replacement attendance system that would allow for the "majority of the analysis to be done very easily on some sort of a database, centralised system" (PSS) as was called for by all the interviewees. A streamlined data collection system should be designed to lessen the administrative requirements and allow for improved electronic communication between all those involved.

In relation to the current attendance reports to NEWB, there is need for a consultation with schools about what works in practice. This should include a review of the absence categories (Appendix F) and their meanings as this has not been revisited since the NEWB began the implementation of data collection through school returns. One example of this is the lack of a single category for holidays even though this was a trend that everybody was aware of. Another example of a proposed improvement is the inclusion of a notification category. This would apply to receiving a notice from other schools once a student has started there and would help to establish the whereabouts of each student. This proposal links to the strong suggestion in the interviews that the figures might be more meaningful if they

indicated clearly the students that are no longer actually enrolled in the school when attendance returns are sent in.

The reported success of the Attendance Monitors merits specific attention in terms of intervention strategies. This system would benefit from being evaluated to identify the elements that appear to be successful for the schools in this study. The outcomes of this evaluation could determine whether or not this system could be mainstreamed to other schools involved in the DEIS programme as a central component of the data collection systems. Any change or amendments made to the implementation of an educational welfare service will only be successful if they are disseminated well and involve those whom they affect.

Leading an Integrated Response to Poor Attendance

Another recommendation links with best practice procedures for successful implementation. There should be clear communication channels established within the protocols of a modern, responsive educational welfare service. The benefits should include a sharing of perspectives in relation to providing a service for children and families and the clarity of roles and responsibilities of all those involved. The objective of this service alignment should be to streamline support services for families and to clarify the accountability of all those involved.

The NEWB is well positioned to lead this integrated initiative based on the learning and developments to date. It is critical that their role and responsibility to promote this development is not undermined by the recent transfer to the new DCYA. There needs to be systems put in place to ensure clear roles and

responsibilities between NEWB, DCYA and the DES to ensure accountability for school attendance at all levels.

Learning Community

To support the inter agency alignment local learning communities should be created. These should be cross-disciplinary in nature and linked with policy structures such as the Children's Services Committees (OMCYA, 2011). These channels should include processes for reflection and learning that involve consideration of up-to-date research findings and their implications for practice. The learning communities should also include participation of parents in a way that allows for mutually respectful dialogue and learning.

An inter-disciplinary and a participatory focus in the provision of an educational welfare service that puts children and their families at the centre should be included in continuing professional development for teachers and other practitioners. This proposal could incorporate the recommendations of Lodge and Lynch (2004) for specific in-service training for teachers and school management in relation to equality legislation and its implementation. This would involve reflection and sharing of best practice while working in schools in areas of disadvantage. In addition to a focus on equality, the training of educationalists should include a focus on methods and protocols for working collaboratively on behalf of children and their families.

Concluding Comments

The changing legislative landscape in Ireland over the past two to three decades has provided for an enlightened approach to educational reform. The DES has put in place a number of targeted approaches to address educational disadvantage. The most recent action plan DEIS (DES, 2005), is an ambitious attempt to move beyond educational disadvantage and ensure that all children reach their potential within the education system. The early indications of improvements in literacy and numeracy attainment within primary schools adopting DEIS strategies is to be welcomed (DES, 2011). It is also encouraging that there is evidence emerging of positive engagement by school personnel with the range of supports provided under the School Support Programme. The reports of the ongoing evaluations of DEIS (ERC & DES) will provide important signposts in terms of the implementation of this plan and its impact on educational disadvantage and poor school attendance.

The enactment of the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) provided the legislative and policy mechanism to curtail the extent of absenteeism at primary school. There is evidence of a strong and definite commitment to prevent and curtail this phenomenon within the educational system. The NEWB has developed a plan by which it uses the legislation as a framework to deliver a service to ensure that all children get the education they should. The shift to the concept of participation and a renewed focus on integration and collaboration in the integrated response is welcomed. If this work is to be truly transformative, mechanisms will have to be put in place to enable all statutory services such as schools, social work

services, special initiatives and the NEWB to work together and to position the child and family's needs at the centre of their interventions.

Schools and the School Support Programme have also embraced the aspirations of the Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000). Much effort has been put into complying with the data collection requirements of the legislation and implementing strategies to improve attendance. However, many are disillusioned by the lack of improvement in the attendance figures, especially in relation to a specific number of students. There is a willingness to embrace efforts to find out more about the needs of these students and this willingness provides an opportunity for collaborative work practices and reflective dialogue.

There needs to be an acknowledgement that adopting strategies that embrace equality is an enormous challenge. Responding to the multifaceted and multidimensional complexity of educational disadvantage and the phenomenon of poor attendance requires specific support and resources to design and implement transformative practices. All those working with young children and their families need to be assisted to understand the effects of poverty and marginalisation. However, it can't be left to the schools and services as this problem reflects the inequality that exists in our society. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 6 the problem of educational disadvantage requires a shift in how the problem is understood. This proposal builds on the call for profound system change by NESDO (2009) which is cognisant of the emerging focus on the interaction between governance structures, market forces and society. It recognises the need for *cross-fertilisation* and an

alignment between system levels to ensure clear roles, commitments and accountability in striving for a better society for everyone living in Ireland.

Improvement in school participation in areas of social and economic disadvantage is dependent on radically transforming systemic inequality in our society. It is clear that school attendance poses difficulties for some children and families living with the injustice of poverty and disadvantage. These children begin to adopt a habit of poor attendance at a very early stage in their educational life and this is a predictor of later life chances. The persistence, in DEIS schools, of such high rates of absenteeism, despite enormous efforts on behalf of schools and agencies, is a symptom, a reminder that the fundamental, systemic issues of inequality in our society have not been adequately addressed.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Letters of request to The Board of Management of Schools

C/o (School Principal)

25 April 2008

Dear ,

Thank you for agreeing to see me in relation to my research project which I am undertaking under a Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. The working title for the research is "To develop a conceptual framework that will inform research analysis of the patterns affecting significant absenteeism in a cohort of primary school children in an area designated as disadvantaged".

The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the issue of school absenteeism and it will initially involve reviewing roll books in a junior and senior primary school. The focus of the review of the roll books is to identify patterns and trends over one school year (2006/2007). The review will involve copying data from the roll book on to a previously prepared spread sheet. I am willing to undertake this work whenever it is convenient for the school. All the information noted from the roll books will be in a format that will not identify any individual child or the school. This study will have the benefit of taking place in a large urban area which will not be readily identified as there are many similar areas in the country. I will reassure all those involved that I will not name the geographical area of the research in any publication or during any event whereby the findings are disseminated. This research proposal has already been approved by the Ethics committee in St Patrick's College and I will ensure that I abide by its standard of research at all times.

Depending on the results of the first stage it may be decided to undertake a more qualitative piece of research which would involve interviews with teachers, parents and possibly pupils. If it does transpire that this is necessary I will discuss this stage with you and at that point you may consider whether or not you and your

school would like further involvement. Agreeing to the first stage does not in any way commit involvement of (your school) for further stages.

I, Noelle Spring, the investigator on this project have, by virtue of having been accepted on the course, taught doctorate in education, and in the opinion of my supervisor and programme director, the necessary qualifications, experience and skills to conduct this student project. I am currently employed as the Development Director with the Katharine Howard Foundation which is a charitable Foundation mainly responsible for grants to community and voluntary groups throughout Ireland. In addition to managing the Foundation I have designed and coordinated special initiatives including demonstration programmes and research projects. Prior to my current employment I worked as a Projects Officer with the Combat Poverty Agency where my duties included advising Government Departments on policy responses to promote social inclusion. I began my career as a Social Worker and subsequently a Community Worker with the Eastern Health Board (now the HSE). While with the Health Board I worked in xxxx for eleven years as a community worker and was involved in changing the use of XXX from a children's home to a community and family resource centre. During this period I worked very closely with many people working and living in XXX including both primary schools and other agencies. This work engendered a keen interest in educational disadvantage and I have always been exercised by the need to shift some of the many inequalities that result in some children not benefitting as much as others from access to education. I have decided to focus on school attendance in primary schools as this focus offers the opportunity to explore one of the basic essentials of accessing education.

This research project is being supervised by Dr Ann Louise Gilligan of St Patrick's College along with Dr Peter Archer, a research fellow with the Educational Research Centre. They are at all times aware of the work being undertaken in this research project and are available to offer advice and direction to me on an ongoing basis.

I am very grateful for your assistance with this work and really appreciate that in spite of the enormous demands on your school and your time that you have agreed

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to consider involvement in this research project. It is my hope that through this work some small but significant contribution will be made to understanding school absenteeism at primary level.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further clarification or information,

Yours sincerely,

Noelle Spring.

Appendix B: Portraiture of Interviewees

Role and Responsibility of an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO1 & EWO 2 – Pilot)

The Education Welfare Act 2000 allowed for the establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board including specific powers of appointment of Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs). The statutory obligations of the EWOs as set out in the Act have been interpreted by the Board to include the development, co-ordination and implementation of school attendance policy "so as to ensure that every child in the State attends a recognised school or otherwise receives an appropriate education" (NEWB, 2006b). According to the Board, EWOs are appointed to work in close co-operation with schools, teachers, parents and community/voluntary bodies with a view to encouraging regular school attendance and developing strategies to reduce absenteeism and early school leaving. Their role also includes maintaining a register of children receiving education outside the recognised[24] school structure and assessing the adequacy of such education on an ongoing basis (EWA, 2000). The Act specifically permits an EWO to enter a recognised school and inspect the register of pupils during any school day.

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[24] In the EWA 2000 a recognised school refers to a school designated by the Minister as such other the Education Act 1998.

Background details of EWO 2 - Pilot (provided during interview).

Seán, at the time of the interview was a EWO with the NEWB and worked

with schools in a large, mostly urban, region in Dublin. He was in contact with 45

schools, both primary (junior & senior) and second levels schools, some of which

were classified as disadvantaged under the DEIS programme. He had held this

position for approximately five years. Prior to taking on this job he worked as the

education co-ordinator in an urban area based Partnership Company for

approximately two years. Before that he worked as a coordinator in a

YOUTHREACH[25] project, working primarily with unqualified early school leavers

in an area designated as disadvantaged.

The role and responsibility of an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO 2 Pilot) is

described under the pilot interview procedure above. To avoid repetition only the

informal details of the EWO 1 here outlined here.

Background details of EWO 1 provided during the interview.

Jason joined the NEWB in February 2007 and was just over two years working

as a EWO at the time of the interview. He worked with twelve primary schools and

three post-primary schools in an urban area where all the schools were in areas

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[25] YOUTHREACH is a national programme of second-chance education and training in Ireland and is directed at unemployed young early school leavers aged 15-20.

designated as disadvantaged. Prior to that Jason was a teacher in a post-primary

school. He also held a postgraduate diploma in Information Technology.

Role and Responsibility of the (two) School Principals in Relation to Attendance

According to the EWA (2000) school Boards of Management should adopt a

pro-active approach to school attendance by maintaining a register of students

attending the school; record school attendance and notify the relevant Educational

Welfare Officer of particular problems in relation to attendance; support students

with difficulties in attending school on a regular basis; prepare and implement a

school attendance strategy to encourage, in a positive way, regular school attendance

and an appreciation of learning within the school; prepare and implement a code of

behaviour, set standards of behaviour and disciplinary procedures for the school and

liaise with other schools and relevant bodies on school attendance issues. The

executive role of a school's Board of Management is implemented through the

School Principal whose role in relation to the functions outlined above is also

sketched out in detail in the EWA 2000. The Act states that the Board of

Management, Principal, teachers and other members of staff of a recognised school

shall give all such assistance as may reasonably be required by an EWO in the

performance of her /his functions.

*Background details of the Principal of the Junior School (PJS) provided during
the interview.*

Patricia became a primary school teacher in 1977 after working for a number

of years as a Social Worker. She started working in the Junior Primary School 32

years ago, when the school first opened. She held several roles such as classroom teacher, learning support teacher and Home School Community Liaison Coordinator before taking up the position of Principal more than 12 years ago. The first 5 years in the position involved being a class teacher as well as the Principal, after which she became a full-time administrative Principal. Patricia is glad that she held various positions within the school and said that the benefit she derived from this experience included getting "an overall view of life in the community and the life of the school".

Background details of Principal of the Senior School (PSS) provided during the interview.

Ciarán began as a primary school teacher in 1978 and was four years working as administrative Principal in the Senior Primary School at the time of interview. His teaching career included class teacher in primary schools (all urban) including those in other areas designated as disadvantaged.

Role and Responsibility of the Home School Community Liaison Coordinator (HSCL Coordinator)

The role of the HSCL Coordinator is undertaken by teachers who are released from all teaching duties and engage in full-time liaison work between the home, school, and community. The role of the Coordinator includes support for teachers and parents within schools, particularly in the areas of literacy and mathematics. According to the Department of Education and Skills' guidelines the local Coordinator addresses the development of the parent-teacher relationship in collaboration with the local community in order to enhance the nurturing of the

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whole child (DES, 2005/6). The role also involves the development of staff and teacher attitudes and behaviour so that the school becomes a place where all young people can reach their potential. The guidelines emphasise that the Coordinator's initiatives are focused on adults, on parents and teachers, not on children. However, the outcome should impinge over time on children's lives. The primary initiatives are concerned with promoting parents' education, development, growth and involvement and the participation of parents in their children's education including homework support (DES, 2005/6).

Background details of the HSCL Coordinator provided during the interview.

Tony started primary school teaching in the area in 1976 in a nearby school and moved two years later when this school opened. Most of his teaching has been class-based, except for a brief locum position as HSCL Coordinator many years ago. That opportunity confirmed his interest in the post of HSCL Coordinator and he was successful in obtaining this position, working with the Junior and Senior Primary Schools, on a permanent basis approximately eight years ago.

Role and Responsibility of Local School Completion Programme Coordinator (SCP)

SCP Projects, under the auspices of a local management committee employ a full-time Local SCP Coordinator to provide direct support to targeted young people by organising and facilitating the provision of in-school, out-of-school, after school and holiday time supports. The remit as outlined in the special guidelines includes maintaining strong links with relevant agencies and working to the plans as agreed by the local committee (DES, 2006).

Background details of the Local SCP Coordinator provided during interview.

Maria began this current post three years ago. Previously she worked as a youth worker with the youth services in a Community Training Workshop in an urban inner city area. She was an instructor there with early school leavers where she taught various subjects, including home economics for pupils at junior certificate level. Maria is Local Coordinator in the region and works with eight schools, five at primary and three at post-primary level.

Role and Responsibility of the Visiting Teacher for Travellers (VTT)

The official role for the visiting teacher is to act as a bridge between the Traveller community and schools and other services in relation to the education of Traveller children (Directorate of Regional Services, 2006). The main priority for the VTT is outlined, by the directorate, as working directly with Traveller children, their families and the schools with a view to promoting the integrated education of the target population within an agreed framework. The focus of the work with Travellers aims to increase enrolment, attendance and participation at all levels of the education system. In addition, the VTT has an official role in collecting data on all aspects of levels of participation and attendance of Traveller children (Directorate of Regional Services, 2006).

Background details of the VTT provided during interview.

Suzanne worked in a primary school for over 30 years and worked as a resource teacher for Travellers for approximately 10 of those years. She began her position with the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers more than two years ago.

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Her work covers a large area which includes both urban and rural communities. Suzanne connects with preschools, primary schools, post-primary schools and pathways to third level.

Appendix C: A Statement of Explanation about the Study

Noelle Spring

Thornton Cottage

Kilsallaghan

Co Dublin

Tel: 01 8351232; 087 2361963

31 March 2009

Dear,

Thank you for agreeing to see me in relation to my research project which I am undertaking under a Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. The working title for the research is "To develop a conceptual framework that will inform research analysis of the patterns affecting significant absenteeism in a cohort of primary school children in an area designated as disadvantaged".

The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the issue of school absenteeism at primary school level. There are two stages to the research; firstly collecting quantitative data through reviewing roll books in a junior and senior primary school and secondly, qualitative interviews with professionals with a focus on school attendance.

The focus of the review of the roll books is to identify patterns and trends over one school year (2006/2007). The schools have kindly allowed me to review the roll books and this information has now been analysed. I am now hoping to set up interviews with a range of professionals such as School Principals, Home School Community Liaison Teacher, School Completion Coordinator, Education Welfare Officer and Visiting Teacher for Travellers. The interviews will involve one hour of semi-structured questions to be held at an agreed time and place. (Topics to be covered will be sent to those involved prior to the interview).

All the information gathered both from the roll books and the interviews will be in a format that will not identify any individual child or school or professional

person. This study will have the benefit of taking place in a large urban area which will not be readily identified as there are many similar areas in the country. I will not name the geographical area of the research in any publication or during any event whereby the findings are disseminated. This research proposal has already been approved by the Ethics committee in St Patrick's College and I will ensure that I abide by its standard of research at all times.

Personal background -

I, Noelle Spring, the investigator on this project have, by virtue of having been accepted on the course, taught doctorate in education, and in the opinion of my supervisor and programme director, the necessary qualifications, experience and skills to conduct this student project. I am currently employed as the Development Director with the Katharine Howard Foundation which is a charitable Foundation mainly responsible for grants to community and voluntary groups through out Ireland. In addition to managing the Foundation I have designed and coordinated special initiatives including demonstration programmes and research projects. Prior to my current employment I worked as a Projects Officer with the Combat Poverty Agency where my duties included advising Government Departments on policy responses to promote social inclusion. I began my career as a Social Worker and subsequently a Community Worker with the Eastern Health Board (now the HSE). While with the Health Board I worked in XXX for eleven years as a community worker and was involved in xx community and family resource centre. During this period I worked very closely with many people working and living in X including both primary schools and other agencies. This work engendered a keen interest in educational disadvantage and I have always been exercised by the need to shift many inequalities that result in some children not benefitting as much as others from access to education. I have decided to focus on school attendance in primary schools as this study offers the opportunity to explore one of the basic essentials of accessing education.

This research project is being supervised by Dr Ann Louise Gilligan of St Patrick's College along with Dr Peter Archer, a research fellow with the Educational Research Centre. They are at all times aware of the work being undertaken in this research project and are available to offer advise and direction to me on an ongoing basis. Mr Eddie Ward is also aware of the study and has given me permission to contact relevant officers of the NEWB.

I am very grateful for your assistance with this work and really appreciate that in spite of the enormous demands on your time that you have agreed to consider involvement in this research project. It is my hope that through this work some small but significant contribution will be made to understanding school absenteeism at primary level.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further clarification or information,

Yours sincerely,

Noelle Spring.

24 April 2009

Dear ,

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of my research project. I am very grateful for your time commitment and sharing your knowledge and experience. The interview should take about one hour and all the material will be treated with utmost confidentiality. I will not be identifying schools or agency personnel in any related documentation.

I have outlined below the key areas that I hope to cover during the interview. This is just to give you some idea of what we will be discussing and by way of a check list for myself.

I look forward to seeing you on Monday 27th April at 2p.m. in your office at xxxxx School,

Kind Regards,

Noelle Spring

Key areas for interview for thesis research –

1. Background of interviewee – role and responsibilities etc

2. Background of school and history of support programmes such as Give Children an Even Break and DEIS etc (This question will apply mainly to School Principals and HSCL)

3. Views on collecting data on school absenteeism including beginning at age 6 years, 20 day cut off period and methods of collection.

4. Discussion on national figures arising on school absenteeism, i.e. 6% nationally and 11% in schools designated as disadvantaged. How these figures might compare with figures for these particular schools.

5. Patterns and trends of absenteeism in primary school including gender and cultural differences, grades, time of the year, days of the week etc.

6. Views on statutory response to school attendance and inter-agency work in your area

7. Attendance strategies at school level?

8. Main reasons pupils miss school at Primary School level including school related reasons and pupil related reasons.

9. Effects of absenteeism on pupils themselves, other pupils, teachers, parents?

10. Any other information/ comments that the interviewee would like to add?

Appendix E: Question Schedule for Semi-Structured Interviews

April 2009

Welcome & Introduction –

Context Questions –

Name

Gender

Current role

Main Responsibilities

Other previous experience relevant to knowledge of school absenteeism?

History of the schools (or geographical area) and school support programmes currently and in the past?

Questions arising from data from the roll books

1. Overall non- attendance for both schools is around 10.2%, slightly less than the national average for schools in areas designated as disadvantaged. There is very little difference overall between both schools. Is this figure what you would expect?

2. In relation to the junior school non-attendance is highest in infant classes (12.2% in Jnr infants & 11.8% in Sen Infants). Why do you think this might be the case?

3. Best attendance between both schools is in 1st class (8.1%). What might explain this?

4. After a steep rise to 9.9% in second class the level is relatively low at 8.8% in 3rd class. This is after transition to senior school – would this concur with your experience?

5. The percentage rises significantly in senior grades – Would this be your experience and why might this be the case?

6. The majority of pupils with significant non-attendance appear to attend school on Tuesday to Thursday - Would this be your experience and why might this be the case?

7. Do you think non attendance is higher for boys or girls in primary schools - Would this be your experience and why might this be the case?

Overall Macro Questions –

1. Is school non-attendance at primary level something that Irish society should be concerned about?

2. 95% of primary schools made returns to the NEWB after 05/06 school year – implying that most schools take the issue of non – attendance very seriously – would you agree or disagree with this? Please elaborate?

3. What are your views of the current national system for monitoring school attendance?

4. Are you aware of school attendance strategies at school level? Can you describe these and what they achieve? (or Does your school adopt a school attendance strategy? Please describe?)

5. Different terms are used in various jurisdictions such as explained and unexplained. What terms do you use and how are these applied?

6. The school roll book includes information on each pupil for the entire school year – do you think this information could be useful to the NEWB or DES?

Absenteeism in general questions-

1. According to the NEWB School absenteeism is currently at unacceptable high levels – (6% at national level with 11% in disadv. areas), does this reflect your experience?

2. Can you provide a profile of a child with significant non-attendance?

3. What are the main reasons that children miss primary school?
   PROMPT – Please elaborate– break down to Pupil related issues versus school related issues.

4. What are the effects of missing school on these children? (Prompts – social/ achievement/ others)

5. What other effects can you name (prompt - on the school) of the non-attendance of some pupils?

6. In your experience at what grade does it usually become apparent that a child is developing a school attendance problem?

7. In your experience is there much difference between boys and girls?

Interagency supports

1. What is your experience of interagency cooperation / integrated support services?

Appendix F: School Absence Report Categories

(Page 5 of Primary School Absence Report as sourced on NEWB's website. https://www.schoolreturn.ie/resources/2010/newb_guidelines_eng.pdf)

CATEGORY OF ABSENCE: Enter the number of days absent in each category of absence since the beginning of the school year. The sum of the numbers in each category should equal the total number of absences since the beginning of the school year.
(See below for detailed description of absence categories).

SCHOOL COMMENT: A Principal may wish to indicate that he/she is concerned about the attendance of a student, giving reasons for the concern. For example, the Principal may be dissatisfied with the reasons for absences, or may be concerned about the pattern of absences. A Principal may report concerns even if the number of days absent is less than 20 days (giving reasons for concerns).

A: Illness reported as reason for absence.

B: Urgent family reason – an urgent family circumstance reported as the reason for absence e.g. bereavement *(please give detail in school comment section of the form)*.

C: Expelled -The Board of Management has expelled the student (all internal and external appeals processes have been exhausted).

D: Suspended- Student has been suspended from school (a suspension is defined as 'requiring the student to absent himself/herself from the school for a specified, limited period of school days').

E: Other -All other reasons given by parent/guardian e.g. holidays, religious observance, death of a student, emigration (please describe exact reasons given in *school comment* column).

F: Unexplained -Parent/guardian gave no reasons for this/these absences.

G: Transfer to another school-The school has received written notice from another school that the student has transferred to that other school.