



Primary school principals' perceptions and practices of parental involvement and partnership with reference to their experience of Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI)

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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 Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, 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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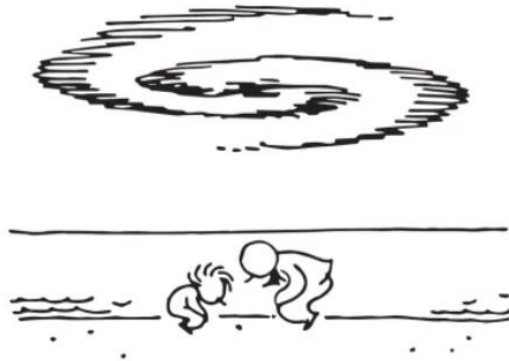


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Date: 1st August 2023

Dedication

To the memory of my darling Dad, Hans, who passed away in October 2022 as I attempted to run the final furlong of this race. Although heartbroken, I was not alone, you never left my side.



*He on whom
God's light does fall
sees the great things
in the small.*

Piet Hein

(Hein, 2002)

My world was illuminated by a bright light with the arrival of my beautiful little granddaughter Heidi Kane in 2020, who brings happiness, love and joy everywhere she goes. Heidi, you gave me the strength and courage to keep going.

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Finally, and most of all, I am grateful to my incredible husband Gavin, who went above and beyond all limits to ensure that I realised my dreams and completed this degree. A full chapter on what 'true partnership' is could be written about the many ways Gavin helped me; it would include sections on moral support, delicious dinners, parenting skills and lots of hugs. Our three amazing children Robyn, Frank and Zoë are my reason for being. I am so lucky to be their Mum. They cheered me on in countless ways and believed in me when I doubted my ability to meet the mark. You are the kindest people I know and I can never thank you enough.

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List of Abbreviations

ATP:	Action Team for Partnership
BOM:	Board of Management
DCU:	Dublin City University
DE:	Department of Education
DEIS:	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Skills
HSCL:	Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator
INTO:	Irish National Teacher Association
IPPN:	Irish Primary Principals Network
LAOS:	Looking at our School 2022
NCCA:	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NNPS:	National Network of Partnership Schools
NPC:	National Parent's Council
PA:	Parents' Association
PI:	Parental Involvement
PSI:	Partnership Schools Ireland
SSE:	School Self Evaluation
SPCB:	Student Parent Charter Bill

Abstract

Primary school principals' perceptions and practices of parental involvement and partnership with reference to their experience of Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI)

Heidi Collins

This research study explored primary school principals' perceptions and practices of parental involvement and partnership with particular reference to their experience of the Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI) initiative. Specifically, it explores the motivations, practices, challenges and benefits associated with the partnership programme as experienced by primary school principals. The study aimed to expand the knowledge and understanding of research-based models of partnership in school communities. The rationale for the study was a response to impending legislation, the Student Parent Charter Bill (Oireachtas, 2021) which will increase the requirement for schools to strengthen stakeholder voice and improve the experiences of students and their parents (Department of Education and Skills, 2019b).

Given the interchangeable and often 'messy web' (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014) of terminology relating to the subject, the literature review followed Jabareen's (2009) process of selecting relevant empirical data, then categorising, identifying and naming key theories and concepts. This enabled the development of research questions and an overall conceptual framework for the study. Based on the literature review, parental involvement (PI) and partnership emerged as two distinct areas. PI is conceptualised as an accepted norm in education typified by school-led practices such as attending meetings, volunteering and fundraising. Partnership is associated with structured programmes and project-based activity designed to deliver shared goals in school communities. Parental engagement is the continuous connection that schools create with parents with a focus on the importance of home-based interactions to support learning.

The study followed a qualitative research design using data gathered from semi-structured interviews with seven primary school principals who had participated in the PSI initiative. The interviews were coded following a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2012) using Nvivo software which provided five overall themes. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory was employed as a lens through which to view the topic.

The findings revealed benefits of the PSI programme, including integration with school self-evaluation and inclusion of parent and student voice in decision-making processes. This research shows that effective partnerships require an inclusive approach to school leadership based on strong communication and facilitation skills. Challenges to the operation of a successful partnership programme included workload and sustaining momentum for the initiative. Further research is warranted to capture the perspectives of parents, children and community representatives regarding family-school partnership programmes.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This qualitative study explores primary school principals' perceptions and practices of parental involvement and partnership with particular reference to their experience of Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI). Specifically, it explores the motivations, practices, challenges and benefits associated with the partnership programme as experienced by primary school principals. Parental involvement in education is commonly associated with positive outcomes relating to student behaviour, attendance and achievement (Desforges *et al.*, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005; Gilleece, 2015; Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). Partnership between families and schools is generally linked to structured learning activities which emphasise equality between home and school and also foster a sense of community (Epstein, 2010; Ippolito, 2018; Ishimaru *et al.*, 2018a). School leaders have been identified as having a critical role in the successful establishment of parental involvement and partnership in school communities (Auerbach, 2009; Sanders and Sheldon, 2009; Tett and Macleod, 2020). This study aims to pinpoint specific aspects of the leadership role in the context of a structured framework for partnership.

1.2 Rationale and Contribution of the Research

There are three primary motivations for this study. Firstly, this study focuses on principals' experiences of a partnership programme which includes students, parents and community members. It is the first of its kind in Ireland to explore how the partnership programme is perceived and enacted in seven schools from the principals' perspectives in response to a call for research to give voice to school leaders on the subject of parent involvement (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020).

Secondly, parental involvement in education is recognised worldwide as beneficial for parents, teachers and children (Jeynes, 2010; Povey *et al.*, 2016; Hamlin and Flessa, 2018). In the Irish context, there is a dearth of evidence and evaluation of system-wide policy programmes which aim to promote parental involvement (O'Toole *et al.*, 2019). Minimal Irish research on leading family school partnership exists most of which relates specifically to issues of socio-economic disadvantage (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; O'Reilly, 2012; Ryan and Lannin, 2021). The findings of this study aim to address a research gap in the discourse on parental involvement and partnership in Ireland in broad terms addressing diverse school types from the perspective of school leaders.

Thirdly the language associated with PI and partnership is often contested in terms of definition and meaning (Bakker and Denessen, 2007; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Ryan and Lannin, 2021). This study adds to knowledge and understanding of the concepts of PI and Partnership and the inherent opportunities and challenges therein. It is hoped that this will encourage dialogue pertaining to PI and partnership programmes which may benefit the various stakeholders in Irish primary school communities.

1.3 Research Context

History and legislation relating to the phenomenon of parent involvement and partnership in education in Ireland provide a backdrop for the study. Developments in the Irish education system which increase the need for collaborative family school relations led to the launch of a national initiative called Partnership Schools Ireland which is described in this section.

1.3.1 The development of parental involvement in Ireland

The Irish National School system¹ was established in 1831 and was effectively controlled by the clergy which served to distance parents from involvement in their children's schooling (Bennett, 2015). Following the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, Article 42.1 of the 1937 Constitution acknowledged the role of as parents as 'the primary educators of their children' (Government of Ireland, 1937). The 1940s and 1950s brought minimal change to the binary power structure of church and state, which suppressed all voices, including parents', from policy making processes in education (Ó Buachalla, 1985). From the 1960s onwards influence shifted and a period began of 'greater tolerance and more scope for the expression of group and individual opinions by teachers, parents and students' (Coolahan, 2000, p. 132).

In 1975, Boards of Management (BOM) for national schools were introduced which was the first instance of parents and teachers alike having direct involvement in the administrative structure of schools (Byrne and Smyth, 2011). Despite this change and efforts to include parents in educational matters, until the mid-nineteen eighties control of primary and secondary education remained under the 'direct sphere of influence and

¹ The Irish national system of education was a response to political, social, economic and religious factors including Ireland's status as a colony of the British Empire; socio-economic factors such as high poverty and low literacy and numeracy levels; and the religious motives of both Catholic and Protestant denominations to use schools as sites of faith education and dominance (Walsh, 2016)

managerial direction' of church and state (Ó Buachalla, 1985, p. 353). The National Parents Council Primary (NPC P) was established in 1985 as an umbrella group for Parents' Associations nationally. Parents' Associations became enshrined in legislation in 1991 (Department of Education and Skills, 1991) and have since become a mechanism for parental involvement in education in Ireland (Eivers and Clerkin, 2013).

During the 1980s and 1990s governments internationally attempted to close the gap between middle and lower-class parents' approach to their children's learning with targeted literacy interventions which were largely modelled on a deficit view of parenting (Bakker and Denessen, 2007). The concept of parental involvement in Ireland was evolving in a similar manner (Conaty, 2002) with the Home, School, Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme which was established in 1990 to support progress and attainment in schools in schools located in areas of disadvantage (Department of Education and Science, 2005b). This coincided with a growing body of global research on the topic of parental involvement which pointed to the inequities of power between schools and families from poor and minority backgrounds (Epstein, 1986; Giroux, 1986; Bastiani, 1995). The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme was established in 2005 to identify levels of disadvantage in a standardised way (Department of Education and Science, 2005a). Both the DEIS and the HSCL schemes were designed to strengthen links between home and the communities to improve the literacy, numeracy and oral language skills of primary school children (Department of Education and Science, 2005b).

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) bolstered the position of parents as partners in education and marked a significant development in the relationship between schools and families (Daly, 2009). The Act put Parents' Associations and parental involvement in schools on a statutory footing by addressing the area in three specific ways. The first stipulation was the establishment of a Parents' Association (PA), which were affiliated to the NPC, in all schools to promote the interests of the students and to develop a programme of activities. Secondly, rules of governance agreed by Parents' Associations were to align with NPC guidelines (Constitution | National Parents Council, 2018). Finally, the Education Act placed an onus on the school principal and Board of Management to have regard for advice from the PA on matters related to the school (Government of Ireland, 1998). Future revisions to the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) in response to the progression of the Student and Parent Charter Bill (Oireachtas, 2019) may require schools to be more accountable to parents. Amendments aiming to improve the

experiences of students and their parents 'by setting out in law a framework that schools will apply in their engagement with students and parents' are currently proposed by the Department of Education (Department of Education and Skills, 2019b). According to the Education Act 1998 a parents' associations should work with the with the Board of Management, principal, teachers and students of a school to promote the interests of the students. This may be achieved by working in partnership with the Principal and teachers to develop and review school policies, extra-curricular activities and guest speakers (NPC, 2022a). The NPC do not currently reference school self-evaluation processes as part of their function.

Legislative and statutory obligations influence school leaders in Ireland in conjunction with national guidelines issued by the Department of Education (Bennett, 2015). This perspective is significant to the study as it may explain certain motivations and perceptions expressed by participants in the study. The Department of Education (DE) communicates policy changes to schools via circular letters (Government of Ireland, 2021). Some, but not all, circulars are statutory and bound by law described by Hogan (1987, p. 195) as 'an increasingly common form of quasi-legislation'. At this time, three circulars in particular inform school principals and Boards of Management of DE standards for parental involvement (Bennett, 2015; Skerritt *et al.*, 2021), namely: Circular 27/91 *Parents as Partners* (Department of Education and Science, 1991); Circular 0016/2018 *School Self Evaluation* (Department of Education and Skills, 2018); and Circular 0070/2022 *Leadership and Management in Primary Schools* which guides best practice through the framework document *Looking at our School 2022* (Department of Education, 2022). In Ireland, Boards of Management are require to publish a combined School Self-Evaluation Report and School Improvement Plan each year, a summary of which is communicated to the whole school community annually. Boards are also advised to complete a legislative and regulatory checklist on an annual basis in order to evaluate the extent to which the school is adhering to its obligations (Department of Education and Skills, 2019a, p. 9). See Appendix A for further detail on these circulars.

Essentially, current guidance to Irish primary schools is a combination of both mandatory forms of PI including administrative structures i.e. Parents' Associations and BOMs; and also, discretionary forms of PI, such as school self-evaluation processes which encourage collaboration with parents. Such discretionary forms of PI do not appear to be uniformly

applied at school level (Skerritt *et al.*, 2021). In the case of parent involvement in school self-evaluation, Brown *et al.*, (2020, p. 168) identify a ‘rhetoric/reality gap’ in terms of any significant collaboration of this kind. A structured framework to support the inclusion of parents and students in school development planning may fill this space and in recent years Irish schools were invited to participate in the Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI) programme.

1.3.2 Partnership Schools Ireland

The PSI programme is a joint initiative of the Department of Education (DE), the National Parents Council² (NPC) and the Irish Primary Principals’ Network³ (IPPN). The main objective of a “Partnership School” is to improve outcomes for children as a result of the whole school community planning and working together on agreed activities (*Partnership Schools Ireland / National Parents Council, 2022*). The PSI programme in Ireland is based on Epstein's (2010) family, school and community partnership typology and the NPC coordinates the programme on a national level in Ireland (*Partnership Schools Ireland / National Parents Council, 2022*). The Partnership Schools model continues to be implemented in the US, its country of origin, and is also widely practiced in Scotland, with approximately 500 schools involved across the three jurisdictions. In Ireland, free training is provided by the NPC on-site in schools at no cost to the school over two x 3-hour sessions. An Action Team for Partnership (ATP) is formed in all participating schools comprising approximately eight to sixteen members who are representative of the school staff, parents and members of the local community (Epstein, 2010, p. 303) to drive the work of the Partnership School. When training is complete, the ATP write their One Year Action Plan for Partnerships for the year ahead. This plan is generally informed by the School Improvement Plan (Appendix K). The ATP works on four goals per year; two academic, one behavioural and one “climate of partnership” or welcome goal. The purpose of the ATP is to:

- Work together with teachers, support staff, parents, children and community members to support, and add value to, the current work of the school

² *National Parents Council Primary (NPC) is the representative organisation for parents of children in primary and early education (NPC Primary, 2018)*

³ *IPPN is the professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence (About IPPN, 2022)*

- Ensure the board of management, parent association, teachers and parents and students are informed of the ATPs activities.
- Monitor each goal and work together to overcome any barriers in achieving them.
- Invite others to get involved with the goals, events and activities.
- Evaluate how each goal has benefited the children and the school's partnership progress.
- Celebrate their achievements.

(NPC, 2022b)

The Irish Partnership Schools model is unique, as Ireland is the only region where students from the school community are also on the ATP. The work of the ATP is expanded on in Chapter Four. Participation in the PSI programme is voluntary and currently forty-four Irish schools have joined the PSI network since its inception.

1.4 Researcher in Context

In my work as a primary school principal for the past twelve years and as a class teacher prior to principalship, the phenomenon of parental involvement in education has always been part of my working world. I am also a parent; thus, involvement in my three children's education has further shaped my view of the concept through my interactions with their teachers and schools. The role of the principal requires extensive communication with parents across various media. At primary school level, newsletters, school apps, and website posts update parents about school events and developments. Within these messages, schools often advise parents to become involved with their children's education to improve learning outcomes. These messages of encouragement appear to stem from an accepted wisdom or perhaps a social norm that parental involvement is beneficial to children. Bennett (2015) asserts that the Irish discourse of parent-teacher relations is constructed on a series of truths including:

that parental involvement is good, that parental involvement was poor in the past but is much better now, that parents need to be educated, that parents are not interested in whole-school policy or decision-making forms of involvement, and that parents' and teachers' or parents' and policy-makers' interests are allied. (Bennett, 2015, p. 287)

Over years of sending messages to parents encouraging their involvement in their children's schooling or requesting their volunteerism for various school-based events, I became curious about the validity of my stance that this involvement was beneficial to children and schools, and I was keen to understand how other principals viewed this aspect of their work.

As a principal and a parent, I became familiar with the workings of school Parents' Associations. I developed an interest in these associations' composition, operation, membership and function, which appeared to vary from place to place. In 2017, I attended an information session on the PSI initiative and afterwards the partnership programme was adopted in my school. My experience of leading the PSI programme in my own school context sparked an interest to learn how other school leaders perceive and enact the programme. Of particular interest was how the PSI programme connected to schools' self-evaluation efforts because of many parallels between the PSI framework and school improvement planning and self-evaluation processes.

In my role as a principal and also as a mentor to newly appointed principals with the Centre for School Leadership⁴ (CSL), I noted that much energy and attention goes towards parent-school relationships and how the strength of this link often dictates either the smooth or strained running of a school for many principals. The motivation to expand my knowledge and understanding of family-school relationships was also driven by an awareness that inequities of power abound in this area. In my role as a teacher, a principal and a parent, I have observed inequities relating to gender, socio-economic status and diversity amongst parent populations in school communities and how these challenges can hinder or benefit a child's education. Over time, I became increasingly passionate about this aspect of primary education and in 2018 made the decision to undertake doctoral research on the topic.

1.5 Research Questions and Aim

My professional experience of and personal interest in parental involvement in education combined with a thorough review of the literature on the topic informed the development

⁴ CSL Ireland is a joint initiative of IPPN, NAPD and DE and provides a continuum of professional development for school leaders in Ireland including mentoring and in career support. CSL partners with the DE in an advisory capacity on policy development relating to school leadership.

of the research questions for this study. The aim of the study is to provide a critical and detailed account of primary principals' perceptions and practices of PI and partnership by addressing the following questions:

- How do primary principals perceive parental involvement?
- What are the motivations of primary principals to become involved in the Partnership School Ireland programme?
- How is the PSI programme enacted in schools?
- What are the challenges of becoming involved in a partnership programme?
- What are the benefits of becoming involved in a partnership programme?
- How did the PSI programme contribute to parent involvement?
- In what ways did school-wide processes or policies change as a result of the work of the partnership team?

1.6 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework enables the researcher to “see” and understand aspects of a phenomenon (Given, 2008). Therefore, an appropriate theory which is established in educational research was selected. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecology Systems Theory is the basis for the theoretical framework applied to this study as a lens through which to view this social phenomenon. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory model highlights the links between interdependent spheres in which children interact, such as within families, schools and wider communities (Tekin, 2011; O' Brien, 2019). Ecological systems theory is illustrated in Figure 1.0 and consists of micro-, meso-,exo-, and macro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The micro system represents the immediate family unit, expanding to the mesosystem, which is comprised of schools and other institutions. The exo-system represents the factors in the world indirectly affecting development, and the macro-system signifies the world at large, including culture and society.

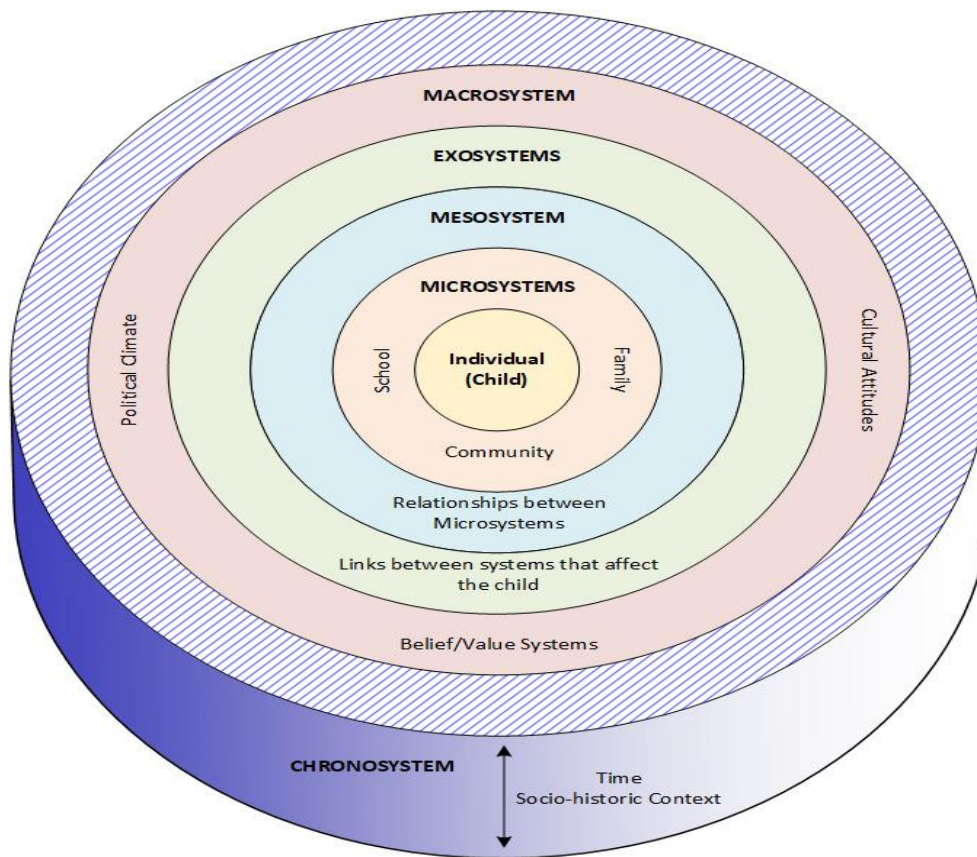


Figure 1. Ecological Systems Model based on Bronfenbrenner (1979)

For Bronfenbrenner, there are two environmental principles of development. Firstly, children require enduring involvement from one or more adults, expressed as ‘somebody has got to be crazy about that kid’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 4). Secondly, this form of joint activity must be supported by public policies and practices which support parental involvement in their children’s development. Such activities and policies provide opportunities for encouragement, good example, stability, and above all, time from adults in the child’s life both within and outside the home (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 262). According to Bronfenbrenner, the quality of the links between these various dimensions serve to enhance child development. As the study aims to examine perceptions and practices of PI and partnership, the links between home, school and community are significant, so this theory has much to offer in terms of interpreting the principals’ accounts of their experiences of PI and the PSI framework.

In 2005, Bronfenbrenner presented a theory development, which was reframed as the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model. This model was designed to enable researchers to conceptualise human development, recognising the equal importance of all elements; the person, the context and time in creating ‘proximal processes’ or interactions

in which growth takes place (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. xv). Although Tudge *et al.* (2009) assert that the PPCT model is the most suited to modern research, the decision to use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological systems theory was made for this study. One rationale for this decision was that Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory informs Epstein's (2001) Overlapping Spheres of Influence theory which is the basis of the PSI programme (Epstein, 1985). Both models emphasise the centrality of the child and how the interplay between social contexts i.e. 'systems' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) or 'spheres' (Epstein, 2010), whether nested or overlapping directly impact child development. Also, the concept of nested systems in the ecological systems model is accessible to contemporary Irish educators who will be familiar with its recent use to support the Aistear (NCCA, date) curriculum and also the Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice (Department of Education and Skills, 2019c). Theoretical frameworks have the ability to both 'reveal and conceal' in research and the delimitations of choosing this lens for the study, which may 'blind us to aspects of the phenomena that are not part of the theory' (Given, 2008, p. 873), will be acknowledged in Chapter Three.

1.7 Overview of Chapters

This first chapter introduced the research area of parent involvement (PI) in education and family-school partnerships and located these concepts in an Irish context. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on PI and Partnership. Resulting from the review of the literature, a theoretical framework for the study is developed and critical decisions regarding the development of the research questions and methods are made. Chapter Three outlines the research methods employed for the study. The philosophical assumptions underpinning the study, ethical and data handling procedures are also addressed within this chapter. In Chapter Four, the findings of the study are presented and critically analysed using the study's theoretical framework. Five themes are proposed and discussed in this chapter. Following on from the findings chapter, Chapter Five is a discussion of the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework combining Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory with the key concepts identified in the literature review. Chapter Six will focus on concluding remarks and recommendations arising from the study.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the context, the aims and the rationale of this study. By highlighting current practice among school leaders and bringing their voices to the fore it is anticipated that their contributions will provide insight into the operation of partnership programmes

and help to inform future policy and practice relating to PI and partnership. I highlighted my status as an insider in the research and provided a rationale for the study. The theoretical framework for the study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was described. Finally, an overview of each of the following chapters of this study was outlined. The next chapter reviews the literature on the topic of parental involvement and partnership.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research explores primary school principals' perceptions and practices of parental involvement and partnership with particular reference to their experience of Partnership School Ireland (PSI). The research explores the motivations to become involved with the programme and the challenges and benefits therein from the principals' perspective. The chapter is structured as follows: The review seeks to clarify the terminology surrounding the concepts of parental involvement (PI), parental engagement and partnership. The complex nature of the phenomenon is acknowledged by foregrounding the differentiated nature of parental involvement and critiques of partnership. The chapter concludes with an illustration of the methods used to interpret the literature following Jabareen's (2009) procedure of theorisation for the development of a conceptual framework for the study.

PI and Partnership are portrayed as separate concepts. Parental involvement in education is framed as a broad term to describe parents' involvement in their children's schooling characterised by activities such as attendance at school meetings, volunteering and helping with homework (Flessa, 2008; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009). Partnership between families and schools is observed as an active response by schools to increase PI, often typified by structured co-designed projects involving families and schools (Epstein, 2010; Ippolito, 2018; Ishimaru *et al.*, 2018a). Next, facilitators and barriers which influence PI are examined. Partnership is discussed in terms of motivations, challenges and benefits outlined in the literature and Epstein's typology for partnership is introduced.

Before reviewing the literature, a search was conducted to collect a corpus of relevant literature using, Sage Publications, Dublin City University library and Google Scholar. Keywords included; parental involvement, family school community partnership, home school partnership and frameworks for partnership in education. The search was refined to academic journals, commissioned studies, books, reports and policy documents. A reference list of two hundred and thirty-one titles was compiled using Zotero software. From the initial searches further literature was found using the reference lists of these primary sources.

2.2 Understanding Parental Involvement, Engagement and Partnership

Extensive research on parental involvement has been carried out over the past forty years and informs national education policy, particularly in the USA, Europe and Australia (Menheere and Hooge, 2010). Parental involvement is best viewed as a complex multifaceted phenomenon (Bruïne *et al.*, 2014). The terminology associated with the concept of PI is interchangeably referred to as parental involvement (Jeynes, 2010), engagement (Goodall, 2018a) and partnership (Epstein and Clark, 2004). Due to the individual nature of socially constructed views, the definitions associated with parental involvement in education are regularly contested due to the lack of analysis of its actual meaning (Bakker and Denessen, 2007). This section addresses the tangled ‘web of variables’ (Harris and Goodall, 2008, p. 279) to understand the factors associated with terms parental involvement, engagement and partnership with a view to arriving at a succinct definition of PI and Partnership for the purpose of the study. Given that PI can be viewed as a ‘complex process that often transcends the geographic boundaries of home and school’ researchers often choose to portray it with either a home- or school-based focus (Ice and Hoover-Dempsey, 2011, p. 345). For practical reasons this study concentrates on the school-based aspects of PI, primarily this interpretation was appropriate to answer the research question which is to explore wide the range of understandings and activities as experienced by school principals leading the partnership project. Secondly, based on the scope of the research study as well as the participant profile the use of the term parental involvement was deemed most suitable in this context.

2.2.1 Parental Involvement in Education

Parental involvement in education is a term broadly used to describe the many ways in which parents support their children's learning journey and spans a range of activities at home and at school (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). This involvement positively affects children's social and academic outcomes (Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005; Jeynes, 2010). As primary school education begins, home-based involvement in children's education can encompass access to transport, library trips, supporting homework tasks and extracurricular activities, all of which require economic and often social capital on the part of the family (Crozier, Reay and James, 2011, p. 200). Typical school-based activities include parent-teacher meetings, attending school events such as sports competitions, concerts and parents’ evenings (Hanafin and Lynch,

2002). School's work is often supported by utilising parents as a resource to fundraise and assist with projects (Flessa, 2008). In the Irish context, a more formal type of parental involvement takes place when parents are involved in the school's democratic structures on Boards of Management or Parents' Associations (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; O' Brien, 2019). Although much empirical evidence supports the effectiveness PI in terms of learner outcomes PI not all forms of PI are positively linked to individual-level academic achievement (Park and Holloway, 2017; Boonk *et al.*, 2018). There are more complex reasons why PI is so frequently described as a multifaceted phenomenon (Bruine *et al.*, 2014, Goodall and Harris, 2014). which are examined next.

Social class, gender and race profoundly shape parental involvement in schools (Auerbach, 2007; Crozier *et al.*, 2008; Vincent, 2017); parental role construction and schools' expectations of parents add to the complexity of PI (Nakagawa, 2000). Spontaneous or voluntary involvement begins at home, in the pre-school years of a child's development (Desforges, 2003; Jeynes, 2010), as parents encourage the development of speech and language, movement and play skills (Allen *et al.*, 2015; NCCA, 2017). This parental input is relational and unique to the particular family context. Parents' initial link with primary schools happens at the point of school placement processes such as school selection and registration (Vincent, 2017). The changing nature of society and class culture become significant at this point (Pavlakis, 2018) and this intersectionality adds to the complexity of parental involvement (Flessa, 2008). As children begin their primary school journey, the phenomenon of parental involvement becomes differentiated, and experiences vary from family to family. The selection of 'which' school and the level of choice that parents have indicates that parental involvement at this juncture is often an issue of social class (Lareau, 2000). Parents from poorer socio-economic areas enjoy fewer options than middle-class parents (Exley, 2013) who tend to be more informed and have greater resources to travel further afield to a preferred school (Darmody and Smyth, 2018).

Gender is a factor that influences parental involvement (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Historically, mothers predominantly became involved with children's schooling (Lareau, 2000) where this maternal involvement is linked to the concept of emotional capital (Reay, 2004). More recent research acknowledges the pressure on mothers to 'organise and manage children's lives' while also balancing full-time careers (Vincent, 2017, p. 4). Although fathers' rights to parental leave are slowly increasing, the concept of intensive-mothering or intensive-parenting brings us back to the overlap between parental

involvement and issues of socio-economic status (Vincent and Ball, 2007). Ryan and Lannin (2021) assert that schools have a responsibility to address gender imbalance in parental involvement by encouraging more fathers to become involved in school-based activities. This may be done by tailoring the activities, scheduling and nature of the involvement to suit paternal motives and interests (Ryan and Lannin, 2021, p. 205).

Racial diversity is a common feature of modern schools (Grayson et al., 2014) and is often attributed to a cultural mismatch between teaching staff and the communities they serve (Blackmore, 2010). Tensions can run high in schools where parents lack trust in the school's treatment of students of colour and therefore advocate vigilantly for their children (Auerbach, 2007). There is a legacy of practices in Western education based on dominant, White, Eurocentric values which significantly impacts PI for families of colour by denying 'other forms of knowledge and above all, parents' and students' autonomy in decision making' (Baquedano-López, Alexander and Hernandez, 2013, p. 169). American research found that the wellbeing of low-income, black single mothers was significantly affected by racism within the education system (Elliott, Powell and Brenton, 2013). Educators are called on to identify and address 'imbalances and exclusionary actions toward students and parents from nondominant communities' (ibid.).

In the case of both home and school-based parental involvement, teachers may have underlying assumptions about parents' ability and desire to meet the expectations of schools, whether by contributing their time, financially or through physically attending events (Nakagawa, 2000; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009). The concept of parenting, specifically what counts for 'good parenting', is socially constructed, and influenced by experience, culture, values and beliefs (Auerbach, 2007, p. 251; Nakagawa, 2000; Horvat, Weininger and Lareau, 2003). Equally, the unique context of individual schools, their communities and their stories generate many variables in the picture of what 'good schools' look like (Cuban, 2003). Schools can support parents in their personal role construction and self-efficacy to support children's learning (Jeynes, 2012), and often approach this task through partnership programmes or projects (Christenson and Reschly, 2010). The process of moving the relationship between parents and schools from 'involvement' to 'partnership' is described as parental engagement (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Goodall, 2018a), which is examined in the next section.

2.2.2 Parental Engagement

Parental engagement relates to the many ways in which parents engage with their children's learning across all spheres of the child's world (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Over time, Goodall and colleagues have sought to clarify and differentiate the concept of parent engagement from parent involvement (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). According to Goodall (2018), the term 'parental involvement' in schooling refers to school-based and school-led PI typified by activities such as attendance at school events, meetings and help with homework. Parental engagement includes those elements but identifies the home learning environment as the most significant setting for children's learning outcomes (ibid, 2018). This recognition values the 'funds of knowledge' that exist in children's lives outside school in the other areas like home and family (González, Moll and Amanti, 2005). Some schools may be unaware of the parental support that children experience in the home (Brooker, 2015). This can range from parents making personal sacrifices to ensure that children attend the best school possible, to the passing on of socio-cultural stories and messages regarding the importance of hard work (Auerbach, 2007). For schools to engage successfully with parents, the relationship between children's home and school environments, or 'microsystems' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) matters greatly (O'Toole *et al.*, 2019). There is potential for schools build 'appropriate support to all parents' based on an improved understanding of parental engagement rather than parental involvement (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014, p. 402).

Goodall and Montgomery (2014) present parental engagement with their children's learning as a continuum foregrounding the importance of context and agency, on the part of both schools and parents. They offer examples and benefits of various actions which promote parental engagement (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). For instance, at the beginning of a child's time in school the dynamic requires schools to inform parents of necessary facts to participate in school life (ibid.). This may change over time as information is exchanged in a two-way fashion between home and school resulting in better learning outcomes for children (ibid.). The manner in which these exchanges occur is significant as the development of good rapport and trust, have positive effects on children's wellbeing, self-esteem and learning (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Torre and Murphy (2014) identify the essential norms for parental engagement which include care, trust, respect, authentic membership, collective work and shared vision. They assert that parental engagement improves student outcomes and is influenced by teacher attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (Torre and Murphy, 2014). Park and Holloway (2017) provided strong evidence that PI boosted students' achievement in mathematics and reading achievement. Significantly, the impact was particularly noted in students from higher socio-economic families. Teachers may require professional development to re-imagine their agentic role in the home-school relationship (Goodall, 2018a). Goodall (2018a) outlines the results of a project which provided school staff with a 'toolkit' to support a broader understanding of the concept of parental engagement based on an asset-based view of the home learning environment and a partnership approach with parents. The provision of time, training and templates were found to benefit school staff in parental engagement endeavours (ibid.).

Parental engagement aligns with Bronfenbrenner's theory by highlighting the significance of the interplay between children's various settings (home and school) and how those links affect the child (O'Toole *et al.*, 2019). By focussing on these relationships or 'mesosystems', schools who invest in parent engagement may successfully build foundations for partnership programmes to succeed (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). Partnership programmes are generally structured, inclusive of parent voice (Epstein, 2010) and sometimes inclusive of student and community voice (Ishimaru *et al.*, 2018b; NPC, 2022b). Partnership is explored next by examining definitions, critiques of partnership and Epstein's theoretical framework for partnership.

2.3 Partnership between parents and schools

A partnership is a collaboration between families and schools that focuses on improving children's social and learning outcomes (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Povey *et al.*, 2016). Kavanagh (2021, p. 222) defines partnership as 'providing opportunities for all members of the school community to be involved in the decision-making process'. From the 1990s onwards, the work of key theorists in the field, such as Epstein in the US and Bastiani in the UK, influenced family-school relationships through the development of partnership models. The commonalities across partnership models highlight positive elements including a dialogic approach, shared goals, commitment, collaborative practice and the presence of a structured framework for communication (Bastiani, 1995; Christenson and Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001). Partnership models soon became

associated with better educational outcomes for children (Epstein, 2001; Patrikakou and Anderson, 2005; Cox-Petersen, 2010) but were also subject to critique for being presented as 'neutral' uncontested terrain (Crozier, 1998).

The language used to discuss partnerships in education is largely interchangeable with terminology including 'parent-practitioner' (Murray et al., 2018), 'home school liaison' (Tett and Macleod, 2020) and 'family school community' (Epstein, 2020) partnership. Most definitions of a partnership between schools and families allude to common goals and values (Cox-Petersen, 2010; Brinkerhoff, 2002) congruent with an ecological systems theory approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Goals may relate to academic and learning outcomes, whereas values can include; children's health, wellbeing and nutrition; the inclusion of students of all abilities; and the acknowledgement of diverse beliefs, customs and languages in school communities (Cox-Petersen, 2010). In this study, the term 'partnership' refers to all concerted, collaborative frameworks or programmes inclusive of family, school and community stakeholders.

2.3.1 Critiques of Partnership

Critics of partnership in education frame the concept as over-simplified and misleading on the premise that ideally families and schools should have equal power in deciding what goes on in schools (Carvalho, 2000). An equitable balance of power is hard-won in partnership models (Brooker, 2015a). Vincent (2013, p. 3) critiques the language of 'partnership', 'participation', 'community' and 'empowerment' as carefully chosen, to suggest particular positive emotions which remain vague and yet invoke a message of support for the common good. In this way, schools can manipulate support from parents, keeping them onside and oriented towards the school's agenda without due consideration for the values of the home (Crozier, 1998). Parents are 'seduced' by the idea of decision-making at the school level to ensure that the state school system remains supported (Carvalho, 2000).

The institutional power dynamics between families and schools is well documented (Crozier, 1998; Cuban, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2007; Brooker, 2015), with reference to the argument that schools historically espoused middle-class values to hold power over parents to maintain control and protect professionalism (Crozier, 1998; Carvalho, 2000). Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 255) uses the term 'settings of power' in education to describe how higher and lower socio-economic conditions have a direct bearing on family-school relations, community attitudes and school effectiveness. Modern discourse on partnership

somewhat hides inequalities of power (Epstein, 2020) which prevent authentic partnership. When schools adopt a deficit view of parents, partnership becomes a vehicle to support the dominant culture and can become tokenistic or ineffective (Horvat, Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Flessa, 2008, p. 21; Hornby and Lafaale, 2011).

Meaningful relationships between families and schools require the development of structures that move beyond mere recognition of diversity towards 'deliberative democratic processes' such as policy frameworks, resources and professional development to enable genuine partnership (Blackmore, 2010, p. 58). Nakagawa (2000, p. 456) notes that 'the good parent is constructed as one who takes the lead of the school, who is involved but not too involved, and who supports but does not challenge.' This observation echoes many critiques of parent-school partnership as a type of surveillance where teachers view parents as 'good parents' when they demonstrate desirable levels of interest and motivation which align with the work of the school (Crozier, 1998; Vincent and Ball, 2007).

Political agendas which drive partnership are critiqued as favouring middle-class families in support of government reform agendas over social justice (Vincent and Ball, 2007; Crozier, Reay and James, 2011; Vincent, 2013). Partnership can be critiqued as driven by schools and by national educational policy to 'harness' support for a neoliberal agenda, for example Munn (1993). In the American context, schools are portrayed as partners, first and foremost, to the economy (Cuban, 2003; Giroux, 2006). Cuban (2003) laments the 'business inspired reform' of schools, which sees early childhood settings as a 'boot camp' for primary education and subsequently each phase of education as 'staging grounds' for the next, ultimately supplying a corporate workforce.

Partnership in schools can be 'double-edged' and linked to the concept of marketisation of the education system (Crozier, 1998, p. 127). On the one hand, teachers are required to be increasingly accountable to parents (Ball, 1993) and are dependent on parents to support children's behaviours while in school (Webster-Stratton and Hammond, 1997, p. 106). With parents in the role of consumer, there is scope for conflict and a risk that parents may even take on the role of 'inspector' over teacher's work, hence eroding professional autonomy (Carvalho, 2000). On the other hand, parents are expected to be more involved with their children's education than before (Crozier, 1999, p. 225). This expectation may represent an imposition on families to carry on the work of the school in the home – ignoring cultural differences and the right of the family to rest and enjoy free time

(Carvalho, 2000). Mutual expectations create sets of attitudes, beliefs and practices (Uphoff, 2000). The expectations between families and schools are framed in the next section as facilitators and barriers to the concepts of PI and partnership.

2.4 Facilitators of PI

Parental involvement in schooling is facilitated by a range of home and school factors (Patrikakou and Anderson, 2005; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). At the school level, these include strong school leadership (Auerbach, 2009; Sanders and Sheldon, 2009), school climate (Marshall, 2004) and school policies for parental involvement (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). Lazaridou and Kassida (2015) provide insight into principals' perspectives of PI in another EU country and propose that school principals nurture parental involvement in three ways; through their attitude, the school climate and communication. Based on this assertion, this section examines how school leadership, school climate and school policy serve to facilitate parental involvement.

2.4.1 School Leadership

School principals lead in formal and informal ways to effectively set the scene for positive relationships with families (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009). A formal approach is characterised by the establishment of effective communications systems such as surveys, welcome meetings and by the utilisation of information systems (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Informally, principal approachability, a friendly school atmosphere and being visible to staff and parents alike help to create connections (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009). Serrat (2017, p 323) describes this approach as 'managing by walking around'.

School leaders are responsible for supporting staff to build school-family relationships (Auerbach, 2009; Valli, Stefanski and Jacobson, 2018) and should be aware that teachers can have reservations about the sometimes divisive or threatening nature of parent voice (Brown, McNamara, O'Brien, Skerritt, O'Hara, *et al.*, 2020). Most schools have systems in place to encourage communication between teachers and parents that builds contextual knowledge and trusting relationships which can reduce teachers' sense of vulnerability (Brewster and Railsback, 2003; Epstein and Clark, 2004). Examples of this encouragement include facilitating communication with parents; including staff in decision-making and also valuing dissenting views relating to PI practices (Brewster and Railsback, 2003). Positive rapport is rooted in good communication; schools reveal much about their will to

involve parents by including them in decision-making relating to children's education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 256).

Quality school leadership requires interpersonal skills to bring people on board to develop shared meanings and values in relation to PI (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009). Settings where teacher autonomy and collegiality are facilitated by strong leadership are more likely to foster confidence to engage with parents and the pursuit of continuing professional development (Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000). When school leaders trust staff by celebrating experimentation with forms of PI and supporting risk, teachers' confidence to engage with parents can grow (Brewster and Railsback, 2003). Supportive leadership and clear modelling of a positive attitude towards parental involvement help reduce the risk of teacher burnout which is influenced by teacher perceptions of student and parent involvement (Van Maele and Van Houtte, 2015).

Tett and MacLeod (2020) contend that a principal's perception of parental involvement is central to the values of parental involvement and partnership activities. Their study draws on Auerbach's tripartite typology to interpret the values at play in school partnership contexts where principals' perceptions are classified as traditional, nominal or authentic (Auerbach, 2010). The findings of Tett and McLeod's (2020) study indicate that a small number of principals demonstrated less openness to parental involvement programmes associated with a traditional school-to-home transmission model. Principals understood the need for parental engagement in the nominal range, but the findings signified that these exchanges were at risk of being tokenistic. Finally, in the authentic range, there was evidence of principals who viewed parents as potential 'change agents' (ibid. p. 457) and described the partnership processes with parents in terms of liberation and empowerment. Positive school climate and culture are linked to successful partnerships across school communities (Cox-Peterson, 2003; Epstein, 2001; DES 2019). This can be developed over time and is closely linked to the values of the school leadership (Auerbach, 2009; Goodall, 2018; O' Brien, 2019).

2.4.2 School Climate

Positive school climate influences parental involvement and partnership (Marshall, 2004). Parents' opinions about schools climate directly affect their levels of PI and shape their children's attitudes towards school (Schueler *et al.*, 2014). The customs, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organisational structures

of a school community are manifested in the school climate (Marshall, 2004). School climate is hard to assess as there are many dimensions to consider (ibid.). Indicators of a positive school climate include welcoming, safe, supportive and nurturing schools which add to better academic and social-emotional development (Berkowitz et al., 2021). A caring and loving school climate is seen as a facilitator for meaningful parental involvement (Jeynes, 2010). There is a correlation between positive school climate and PI in terms of students' social and emotional wellbeing resulting in healthy relationships, less behaviour problems and reduced absenteeism (Caridade, Sousa and Pimenta Dinis, 2020).

Noddings (2002, p. 231) notes that educators must 'earn' the label of being caring by establishing caring relationship practices over time. Teachers' attitudes in favour or against parental involvement are crucial to a positive school climate (Robinson and Harris, 2014; Brown et al., 2020). School climate can be improved when school leaders work with teachers to overcome negative stereotypes or bias towards parents from lower socio-economic or other minority groups, sometimes referred to as 'hard to reach' parents (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Park and Holloway, 2017). By considering diversity— 'the cultural qualities and societal background' —which can impact parents' experiences schools can enhance both levels of PI and school climate (Berkowitz et al., 2021). Practices, processes and policies which enable a welcoming school environment can ease many of the stressors which affect parents during the period where home school relationships are initially formed (Dockett, Perry and Kearney, 2012; O'Toole *et al.*, 2019).

2.4.3 School Policy

The effective implementation of relevant school policies is a facilitator of parental involvement. Strategies designed to foster parental involvement may appear across a range of areas of school policies, such as codes of behaviour and special education policies (Winter and O'Raw, 2010). Homework policies primarily relate to the reinforcement of knowledge and skills (Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020) but can also be designed to foster communication and parent involvement (Van Voorhis, 2004). These policies allow schools to give parents either a proximal or distal role in school life (Taysum and Arar, 2018). Parents hold a stake in the education of their children, which affords them the democratic right to involvement in school decisions (Macbeth, 2002). This aligns with a view of education as part of the 'quasi-market' of public services, with parents as consumers with the power to exert pressure to affect school matters through policy (Munn, 1998).

The number of schools that have developed specific policies to promote parental involvement is on the increase with more schools now documenting parental involvement (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). Although research recommends that schools develop policies to promote parental involvement, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to parental involvement policy development is unsuitable due to the individual contexts of school communities (Robinson and Harris, 2014). In Ireland, the process for school self-evaluation is designed to include the voice of parents and students in school policy design; however, meaningful participation is scarce, and parents are not commonly involved in significant decision-making or the setting of goals and targets (Brown et al., 2020).

2.5 Barriers to PI

Barriers to PI can be a result of family and community factors (Hamlin and Flessa, 2018) and can also be found within the education system (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents' home context, prior educational experiences, beliefs and self-efficacy are significant and can differ from schools' attitudes and agendas which may hinder levels of school engagement (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001, Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

2.5.1 Family and Community Factors

A range of barriers exists between school and home (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). These include time poverty, parents' past personal experience of education, and concern for a negative impact on their child should they appear critical of the school (Brown et al 2020). Linguistic, religious, economic and geographic issues may limit parental involvement (Hamlin and Flessa 2018, p. 702). For example, barriers to involvement increase when parents who struggle with language or literacy feel alienated by schools that only communicate in written text formats such as letters and e-mails (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Working and single parents also tend to be marginalised if unable to be on-site at school for the type of involvement which requires volunteering during the working day or in the evening due to lack of childcare (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 446).

Parents' beliefs about parental involvement can be a significant obstacle if they have limited knowledge or understanding of the educational system and if they lack confidence in their ability to support their children's learning (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). On the other hand, some parents contribute to negative home-school relationships when interactions with teachers become self-serving, threatening or divisive (Brown et al., 2020). Schools where creative practices encourage and support staff to engage with parents positively meet

fewer barriers (Watson, 2012). These practices might include methods used to forge relationships and channel communication (Khalifa, 2012) such as parent chat rooms, social media pages and events scheduled to suit parents' commitments, which are found to be effective (Mercer and Gregersen, 2020). Such strong and healthy relationships require willingness on the part of school staff to foster parental involvement (Khalifa, 2012).

The early years of schooling are vital for building strong connections between home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) but involvement can diminish as children get older (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents are more involved with their children's education during the primary school years and trust between schools and parents tends to decrease incrementally over time (Menheere and Hooge, 2010; Dockett, Perry and Kearney, 2012; Murray et al., 2018). Changing dynamics between home and school settings which occur over time are congruent with the 'chronosystem' in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Parental involvement levels are reduced over time as children get older and transition from primary to secondary school (Lazaridou and Kassida, 2015). As children grow up, the change from the single-teacher relationship of primary school to the many individual teachers and subjects at secondary level can cause opportunities for engagement with schools to diminish, particularly if parents identify that secondary schools are intimidating places (Harris and Goodall, 2008).

Children who are 'at-risk' due to struggles with behaviour and learning difficulties may experience 'intense negative emotions resulting from troubled relationships and unresolved problems or academic exclusion in the context of both school and family' (Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015, p. 114). For this reason, communication with parents of children with special educational needs can sometimes be tense and limit PI (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Schools may focus on "restoring" family and classroom dynamics to create a more positive and "relational" environment in which children thrive and parents actively engage in PI (Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015, p. 112).

2.5.2 Barriers within the Education System

Education systems have undergone rapid socio-economic and political change over the past fifty years (Taysum and Arar, 2018). Ireland is now culturally diverse and professional practice may be left to teachers who may not be specifically trained in diversity matters (Parker-Jenkins and Masterson, 2013). The homogenous nature of student teachers in Irish initial teacher education undergraduate courses, mostly white, female and the middle-class

is in line with worldwide trends (Harford and O'Doherty, 2016). The fact that the majority of Irish primary teachers come from middle-class, settled, white, Catholic backgrounds (Keane and Heinz, 2016) positions them 'a long distance from many of their children's lived realities and the intersecting identity markers which disadvantage them' (Kavanagh, Waldron and Mallon, 2021, p. 7). In Ireland, other factors, such as the Irish language requirement and predominantly Catholic patronage of schools, mean that Irish teachers are less diverse than in other OECD countries, which reinforces the existence of a dominant culture (Heinz and Keane, 2018). Research recommends that pre-service teachers are afforded opportunities to gain skills and knowledge that prepare them for early-career leadership within the wider school community (Lazaridou and Kassida, 2015; Nguyen, King and Roulston, 2020).

Teacher wellbeing is linked to high levels of self-efficacy which leads to stronger collaboration with parents, better student outcomes and the ability to successfully implement new programmes (Ross, Romer and Horner, 2012). Stressors for teachers include curriculum overload, rapid implementation of consecutive programme reforms, involvement with other professionals, such as psychologists and therapists and the portrayal of schools in the media and general workplace stress (INTO et al., 2015). Hooks (2003, p. 86) notes that 'in our society all caring professions are devalued'. When teacher wellbeing is not managed in schools, their ability to support new initiatives can become a matter of self-doubt or anxiety (Ball, 2003). Principals are responsible for staff welfare (Van Maele and Van Houtte, 2015) and in schools where teacher wellbeing is not prioritised, teachers' commitment to engage with parents can suffer (Mercer and Gregersen, 2020).

There is growing awareness in schools of the difficulties experienced by parents today and the reduction in supports for them from government and other agencies (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018) which create barriers to PI. In Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory these social or institutional changes occur in 'exosystems' and 'macrosystems' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 47) and demonstrate how changes in the world at large can impact child development. Approaches to parental involvement are becoming more varied, as are parents' expectations of schools over time (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). The centrality of schools to child safety and welfare, the effective role of school leaders in promoting parental involvement and an increase in willingness of school staff in relation to working in partnership with parents may be due to the influence of research, training and guidance around theoretical models of PI (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). The concept of

structured partnership programmes based on theoretical models which will be examined in the next section.

2.6 Motivations, Challenges and Benefits of Partnership Programmes

This section examines the motivations that drive schools to partner with parents, including compliance with national guidelines and parent expectations. Just as there are barriers to and facilitators of parental involvement, specific challenges and benefits are observed in partnership programmes (Sanders, 2014). The challenges include teacher resistance, leadership style, and stakeholder communication (Povey et al., 2016; Tett and Macleod, 2020). The benefits of partnership are improved student outcomes, better understanding between families and schools and opportunities for a teacher to reflect on professional practice (Galvin *et al.*, 2009; Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015).

2.6.1 Motivation for Family School Partnership

School leaders may well ask where the motivation to promote parental involvement stems from. Perhaps there is a perceived value in encouraging parental involvement, or on the other hand, the action may be borne of the pressures of performativity and accountability (Maguire and Ball, 1994). Many principals simply ‘talk the talk’, engaging in symbolic interactions to meet minimum mandated requirements; while others are motivated by their role conception and ‘walk the walk’ by working against practices that exclude marginalised groups which requires ‘inner resistance or resilience to sustain their social justice work’ (Auerbach, 2009, p. 11). For Fullan (2006), it is a combination of collaboration, networking and accountability that drives school leaders to implement changes in the school context. Depending on the school context, principals may be motivated to foster partnerships with parents who are fully aware of their influential status in terms of school reputation leading to a ‘high level of pressure placed on the principal as an entrepreneur and risk manager, within a competitive and volatile market of rising and falling school numbers’ (Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 496). Motivation to build partnerships in education can be based on economic goals where schools require more resources, policy mandates, value alignment in local communities and strategic leadership decisions (Amey and Eddy, 2015). When school leaders initiate partnerships based on value alignment or strategic planning there is potential for the collective to produce lasting transformational change (Amey and Eddy, 2015).

2.6.2 Benefits of Partnership Programmes

Partnership programmes are beneficial in terms of increasing reciprocal understanding between schools and parents. Teachers consistently report improved opportunities to reflect on their professional practice when participating in partnership programmes (Galvin *et al.*, 2009; Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015). For students, benefits include improved outcomes in terms of wellbeing and also academic attainment (Jeynes, 2012).

Improved appreciation of differing perspectives amongst parents and school staff is a consistent finding in research on partnership projects (Galvin *et al.*, 2009; Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015, Ippolito, 2018). This reciprocity is a crucial element of partnership (Brewster and Railsback, 2003; Parsons *et al.*, 2018). There is a broad acknowledgement that both parents and staff benefit from increased knowledge of partnership processes (Galvin *et al.*, 2009; Sanders, 2014). While parents benefit from the opportunity to learn about school dynamics, communicate concerns and build trust in the school, teachers gain the skills to understand parents' attitudes and become more receptive to working in partnership with parents (Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015). Partnership programmes that seek to address cultural barriers can help parents to increase their knowledge of the education system, network with other parents and to have their voices 'heard' within the school community (Ippolito, 2018). In a Canadian partnership programme that sought to view cultural difference as a valuable resource rather than a deficit, the findings stated that 'logistically, it has proven workable; interpersonally, it has proven to be an effective means of fostering meaningful conversation with parents; and conceptually, it holds the promise of furthering notions of community involvement in education' (Ippolito, 2010, p. 149).

Conversations where school staff acknowledge, recognise and engage with the cultural knowledge of families should form the 'educational starting line' and provide the foundation for quality partnership (Parsons *et al.*, 2018, p133). Relationships based on trust and respect decrease a 'them and us' mentality that may exist between teachers and parents (Galvin *et al.*, 2009; Parsons *et al.*, 2018). The availability of a physical space in the school building, such as an office or meeting room provides a centre for partnership programmes in schools and can make parents feel part of the 'school team' (Sanders, 2014, p. 247) and hence increase mutual respect. A combination of resources and buy-in is required to create the conditions for such beneficial outcomes (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009; Sanders, 2014).

Another key benefit of partnership programmes is that teachers discover opportunities to reflect on practice as part of the process (Galvin *et al.*, 2009; Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015). Reflective practice is associated with teacher professionalism (Schön, 2017). This activity can be described as teachers refining their practice by ‘actively generating new knowledge and understandings that will enable them to transform their practice’ (Sugrue, 2002, p. 320). Studies on partnership programmes demonstrate that teachers found opportunities to reflect and share concerns without fear of being criticised, while also developing skills to work with families in new ways (Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015). Although teachers are familiar with reflective practice, Galvin *et al.* (2009, p. 112) extend the possibility of building time for reflective practice to include parents and other stakeholders within the partnership.

Improved learner outcomes, such as better attendance, wellbeing (Crosnoe, 2001; Galvin *et al.*, 2009), and literacy and numeracy learning outcomes, are indicative of successful partnership programmes (Jeynes, 2010). In Ireland, the NPC publish a ‘Promising Practices’ booklet annually which summarises PSI projects to improve learner outcomes (NPC, 2022b). In the US, a similar publication outlines benefits such as improvements to literacy, numeracy and behaviour in a broad range of school types (NNPS, 2020). The benefits reported by parents include the children taking greater responsibility for learning, intergenerational learning, intercultural learning and care in the community (NNPS, 2008). Recent research provides a comprehensive review of practical examples of Irish partnership projects which contribute towards improved learner outcomes in DEIS schools (Ryan and Lannin, 2021). More detailed research on the actual design of such interventions is needed as much of the evidence is ‘patchy, anecdotal and often based on self-report’ (Harris and Goodall, 2008).

2.6.3 Challenges of Partnership programmes

Significant challenges to the implementation of partnership programmes include a lack of resources, teacher resistance, communication difficulties and an authoritarian leadership style (Ishimaru *et al.*, 2018b; Tett and Macleod, 2020). These major challenges are discussed below.

Schools are differently abled in terms of resources for the provision of partnership models which may depend on the human and financial resources available in the school community at the local or national level (Molina, 2013). Strong administrative support contributes to the implementation of a school plan (Valli, Stefanski and Jacobson, 2018). Many studies

report that the beneficial outcomes from partnership stem from scenarios where a dedicated and funded resource such as a project coordinator, researcher or family liaison worker are employed (Galvin et al., 2009; Sanders, 2014; Tett and Macleod, 2020). Not all partnership projects have access to human or financial resources, which may pose a challenge to schools (Galvin *et al.*, 2009, Molina, 2013).

To better understand the challenges of partnership programmes, organisers conduct post-intervention evaluations (Sanders, 2014). Evaluations can be simple and carried out at a low cost, but essentially must represent all stakeholders, including student voices (Epstein and Sheldon, 2019). In the absence of monitoring outcomes of partnership, the rhetoric of partnership may be strong with practices remaining weak (Galvin *et al.*, 2009). Assessment frameworks would enable a greater understanding of partnership and a more practical determination of what partnership can mean in specific programs and relationships (Brinkerhoff, 2002).

Teacher resistance is a known challenge to partnership programmes (Sanders, 2014). Galvin et al. (2009) found that although 41% of teachers perceive a partnership programme had increased their workload, 59% disagreed, leading researchers to surmise that teachers' innovative practice mitigated the perception of additional workload (Galvin *et al.*, 2009). Staff should be consulted before embarking on such partnership programmes (Galvin et al., 2009; Molina, 2013; Kourkoutas et al., 2015) as not all educational contexts are culturally pre-disposed to partnerships (Galvin et al., 2009; Kourkoutas et al., 2015).

Suggested solutions to teacher resistance include professional development programmes for teachers and principals to improve community engagement skills (Tett and Macleod, 2020). This supports the theory that teacher resistance to partnership stems from inadequate knowledge and training (Sanders, 2014). Such professional development can take the form of in-service education and mentoring within school communities (Epstein, 2018). In cases where teacher resistance takes the form of practices which alienate students and families, school leaders may be required to model leadership to transform such behaviours (Khalifa, 2012).

Communication strategies of school staff have been identified as central to the success or otherwise of partnership programmes (Jeynes, 2012). Communication strategies in partnership refer to the skills of active listening, empathetic interaction, communicating respect, staying focussed on the issues and finding a 'first step', at the comfort level of all

involved (McNaughton *et al.*, 2008). Discourse is described as 'what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority' (Maguire and Ball, 2004, p. 6). Within the discourse of family-school partnership, there is an emphasis on shared values and goals which emerge from consultation and good communication (Goodall, 2018).

Creating the conditions for open and equitable dialogue between families and schools is a challenge for partnership (Epstein, 2010). Hughes and Mac Naughton (2000) offer practitioners bitesize exemplars drawing on Habermas' theory of 'Ideal Speech' and Lyotard's theory of 'Little Narratives' to help visualise a dialogic approach to a partnership which prioritises 'local, collective knowledge about what is in children's best interests' (Hughes and Mac Naughton, 2000, p. 256). Simply stated, this involves exercises to orientate all members of the partnership group towards the requisite skills of speaking, listening and thinking to meet the needs of the local community.

Novel workarounds to improve communication in family-school partnerships can also include the use of role-playing and visual imagery as a basis for conversations that were at risk of 'slipping' into old power dynamics, i.e. principal as authority and parents as subordinate (Ishimaru *et al.*, 2018, p. 50). By placing importance on communication, partnership groups may maximise their potential to be effective and minimise the risk of marginalising participants (Epstein, 2001). Schools and communities may reflect on what motivates partnership practice and how all stakeholder voices may be heard (Galvin *et al.*, 2009). This is challenging, given that most partnership programmes are school-led programmes (Lau and Ng, 2019). Hence, conversations need to be 'open to nuanced, complex, and perhaps counterintuitive', particularly for school staff, who are perhaps more accustomed to being in control of interactions with parents (Ippolito, 2018). Dominant power structures in education have long been associated with a White-dominant, Eurocentric system (Santamaría and Santamaría, 2016). The term 'non-dominant' applies to families from minority groups who hold less social, economic and political power and often find themselves on the periphery of PI and partnership discourse (Santamaría Graff, 2021). Approaches to PI and partnership frameworks can challenge these hierarchies to avoid the continued reproduction of practices, policies, and systems in which inequitable power structures impact children (Santamaría Graff & Sherman, 2020).

Principals are central to family-school partnerships (Galvin *et al.*, 2009, Auerbach, 2009). They find themselves striking a delicate balance between meeting the needs of both families and colleagues at the same time to achieve meaningful partnerships (Khalifa, 2012). Valli *et al.* (2018, pp. 34–35) describe the process as 'bridging and buffering', where school leaders are required to build consensus and handle tensions that can arise from partnership programmes for them to succeed. Partnership crosses boundaries that previously existed (and may still exist) between home, school and community (Valli, Stefanski and Jacobson, 2018, p. 41). This may or may not be embraced as a benefit as schools are accustomed to control, and for teachers and school leaders to forfeit full autonomy is a perceived challenge of partnership (Povey *et al.*, 2016).

An authoritarian leadership style is typified by school led communication (Auerbach, 2010) and can prove detrimental to the cultivation of partnership in school communities (Sanders, 2014). Not all school principals value parents as 'knowledgeable subjects' (Auerbach, 2010), p. 738) or support partnerships with parents regarding school governance issues (Povey *et al.*, 2016). Research shows that some principals see themselves as 'experts' and therefore do not acknowledge the possible benefits of a partnership (Tett and Macleod, 2020). This stance perpetuates a one-way, transmission of 'school-centric' ideals without consideration for the community context (Sanders, 2014; Valli, Stefanski and Jacobson, 2018; Tett and Macleod, 2020). This limits child development which is enhanced when schools and families share vision and goals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 2001). Sanders (2014) states that a 'top-down policy' does not lead to meaningful parental engagement and that principal accountability is one way to increase partnership levels. Trust is built slowly between schools and their communities, leading to authentic partnership, which is often characterised by a transformative leadership style (Khalifa, 2012; Tett and Macleod, 2020).

2.7 Partnership Programmes

This PSI programme is based on Epstein's research-based framework for family-school and community partnerships (Epstein, 2010). This section reviews the research in relation to Epstein's Six types of Involvement framework which is based on the model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence.

2.7.1 Epstein's Model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

Epstein's model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence employs the image of three interlocking rings to illustrate the 'push and pull' effect of the dynamics of school, family and community on children's learning (Epstein, 2010, p. 33). The theoretical model asserts that the most effective learning outcomes occur when schools and families *overlap* through meaningful partnerships such as communication and consultation on policy (Epstein, 2010). Epstein claims that 'the overlapping of school and family can produce family-like schools and school-like families' (Epstein, 2010, p. 35). In contrast, Bastiani and Wolfendale (2013) identify discomfort in the rapport between home and school: 'Families and schools are very different kinds of institutions. Tensions and differences are, in the real world, every bit as present as are co-operation and joint action' (Bastiani and Wolfendale, 2013, p. 2). These two stances represent a case of idealism versus realism in that the former somewhat overlooks the dominant, value-laden nature of school-led engagement, whereas the latter recognises and respects the individuality of the home culture (Carvalho, 2000). Epstein emphasises that research-based partnership programs need to be further underpinned by philosophically assured motives to ensure equality-based practices (Epstein, 2020). Drawn from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Epstein posits that the model (See Figure 2.0) energises an integrated theory of family and school relationships (Epstein, 2010). The degree to which each sphere overlaps depends on four forces; time, school experience and family experience (ibid.) The model accepts that change processes occur in both family and school structures, and appreciates the historical power relations that have bound individuals to educational institutions in the past (Epstein, 2010).

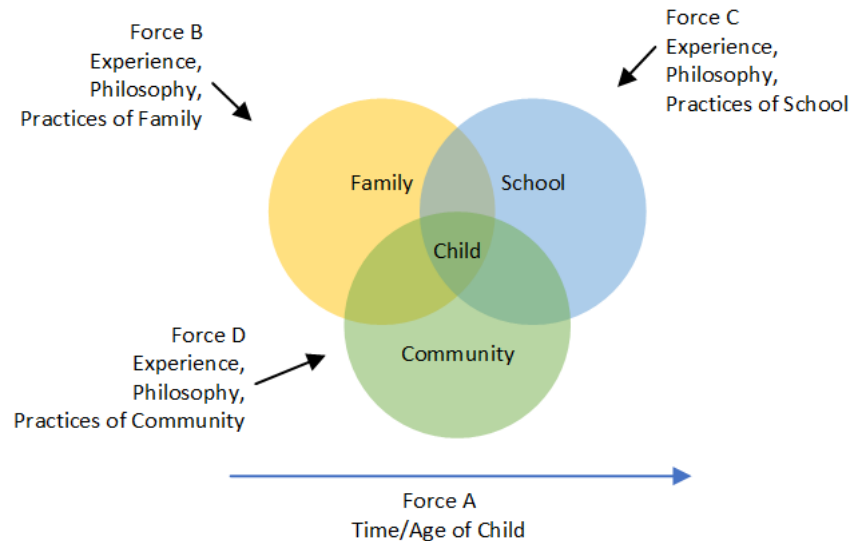


Figure 2: Model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence based on Epstein, 2010

Under this framework, schools, students, parents and communities collaborate to set targets and goals which aim to improve academic outcomes, behaviour and the welcoming aspect of each school (Epstein, 2010). A committee is formed known as an Action Team for Partnership (ATP) comprised of members representing the student⁵, parent, staff and broader local community population. Epstein frames family school and community involvement within the Six Types model. The six types of involvement are;

1. Parenting – Assistance for parents in understanding the development of the child while also assisting schools in understanding families;
2. Communicating – Effective two-way home school links;
3. Volunteering - Quality training, recruitment and scheduling to maximising supports;
4. Learning at home – Involvement families in curriculum and program decisions;
5. Decision Making – Inclusion of families in broader school decisions;
6. Collaborating with Community – Coordination with services, agencies and other groups. (Epstein, 2010).

Though influential, the Epstein typology for involvement is not without critics. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) acknowledge the benefits of Epstein’s contributions but

⁵ In Ireland, the NPC coordinates the PSI programme and the ATPs include students, whereas in the US the National Network for Partnership Schools (NNPS) coordinates and the ATPs do not include student representatives.

posit that the typology presents more of the 'what' of partnership than 'how' (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001, p. 11). They propose that models such as Epstein's suggest activities rather than processes to foster strong connections between home and schools. They offer a guide for schools to foster awareness of families in order to build trust and a welcoming school based on four elements of partnership; Approach; Attitude; Atmosphere; and Actions (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001, p. 4). Critical issues relating to dialogue versus monologue are brought to bear, acknowledging factors that cause 'connections' and 'disconnections' in the home school relationship (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001, p. 38). These issues are congruent with Bastiani's view of partnership which values mutuality, responsive dialogue and 'give and take' on both sides and commitment to joint action, in which parents, pupils and professionals work together to get things done (Bastiani, 1995).

According to Jeynes (2018) Epstein's typology is limited as it implies that the home environment contributes such a small percentage (one sixth) of the overall effects of PI without providing specific detail regarding the most effective aspects of the home setting. Jeynes (2018) acknowledges certain value in Epstein's theory and proposes a Dual Navigation Approach (DNA) to parental involvement and engagement. This ten point model was devised using data from a large scale quantitative meta-analysis of literature on the topic (Jeynes, 2012) and is split between specific family-based and school-based. Family-based components include high expectations, supportive and informative communication, parental style, reading with children and household rules. The school-based elements in Jeynes (2018) DNA approach are Partnership with Teacher, Communication between Parents and the Teacher/School, Check Homework, Parental Participation/Attendance and drawing on community resources (Jeynes, 2018, pp. 154–155).

For Tekin (2011) Epstein's typology being initiated by school staff means that they become the main actors in the operationalising of the partnership. Hence, the model offers researchers limited understanding of parents' perspectives of the phenomenon of involvement (Tekin, 2011, p. 8). This is inconsistent with contemporary view of parental involvement where parents are the key actors engaging with their children's learning in the home (Goodall, 2018a). The Six Types model overlooks psychological factors which motivate parents' involvement practices (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler,

2007), the specific forms of involvement (Fan & Chen, 2001) and whether involvement makes a difference to learner outcomes (Jeynes, 2012). The demographic factors which impact involvement may also be underestimated by school led partnership design (Yosso, 2005).

Hamlin and Flessa (2018) found that areas such as wellbeing and parent–child communication were concealed under Epstein's broad label of 'parenting' (Hamlin and Flessa, 2018). The same study contended that Epstein's areas of 'decision making' and 'volunteering' were overemphasised at the expense of programmes that helped parents to access support and resources (ibid.). The suggestion is that Epstein's adherence to the Six Types of Involvement may be outdated, given that more recent parent-led programmes seek out support for wellbeing and mental health-related projects. Parenting is now a more complex concept, and research-based programmes should reflect that (Hamlin and Flessa, 2018).

2.8 Interpreting the Literature Review

Concept mapping is associated with a constructivist paradigm (Kinchin, Cabot and Hay, 2008) and is used here to integrate key aspects of the literature review which contributes to the development of an overall framework of concepts for the study (Leshem and Trafford, 2007). The diagram in Figure 3 is a concept map of barriers and facilitators of parental involvement identified in this chapter and how they map onto the challenges and benefits of partnership. This visual has four functions. Firstly, it maintains a distinction between PI and partnership as separate concepts. Secondly, it implies that the broader factors associated with parental involvement impact the work of partnership at the school level. Thirdly, parental engagement is conceptualised as a conduit for the progression from parental involvement to partnership. Finally, within this concept map, the role of the principal is highlighted as central (Auerbach, 2009; Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014; Goodall, 2018b). This centrality provides a justification for the research design decision to base the study on principals' perspectives and experiences of a partnership programme. It seems school leaders are pivotal to partnership as without authentic, open and equality-based school leadership, the PSI programme may be at risk of 'merely giving a new name to an old game' (Lightfoot, 2004, p. 92).

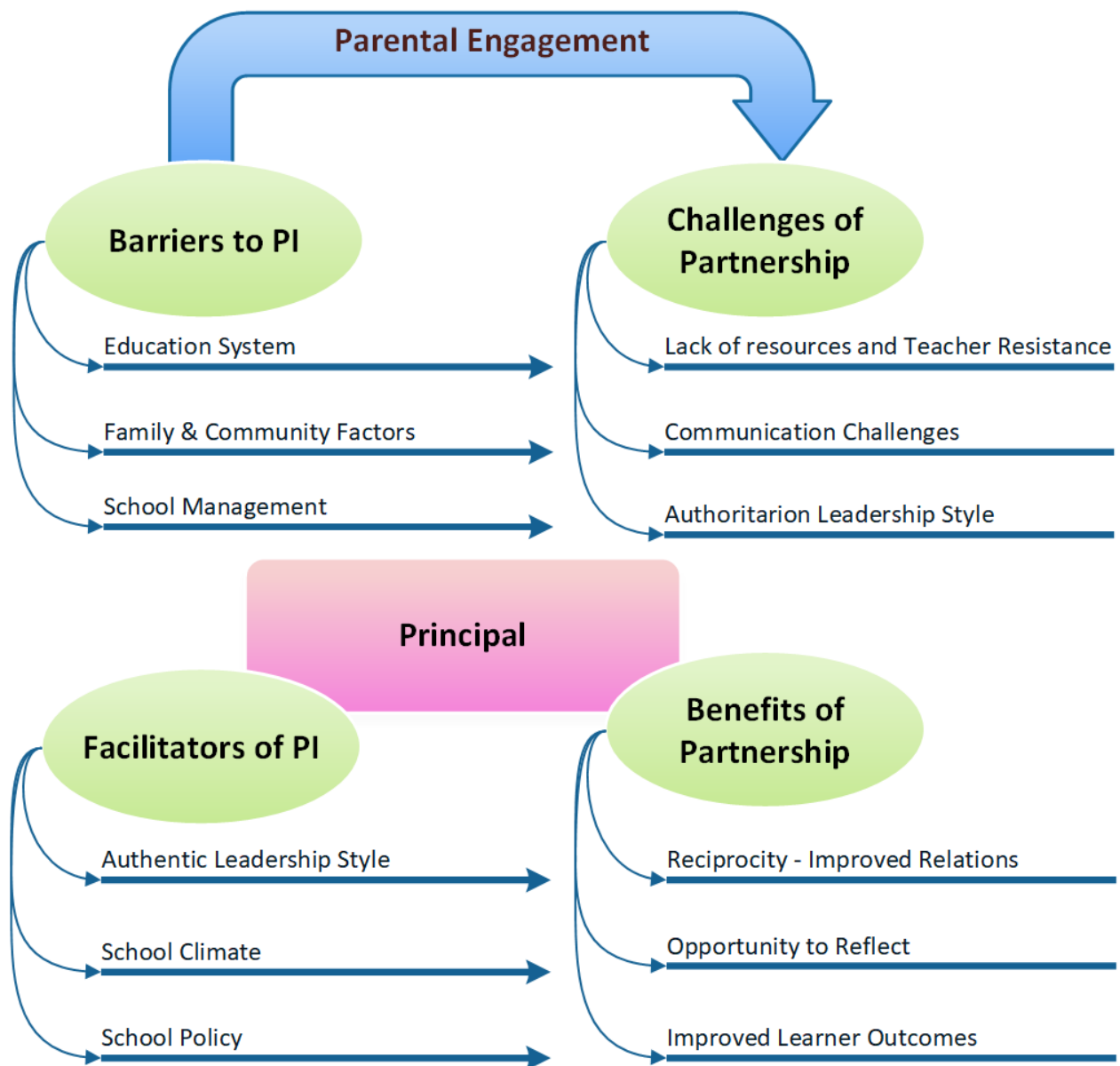


Figure 3: Concept Map of the Literature Review

2.8.1 Applying the theoretical framework

A theoretical framework provides an ‘an anchor for the literature review’, and a basis for decisions regarding the research methods and data analysis (Osanloo and Grant, 2016). The integration of the overarching themes of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory with the key concepts illustrated in the conceptual map above (Figure 3) led to the development of a theoretical framework for the study. Figure 4 (page 38) demonstrates how the key concepts identified in the literature review map to the respective ‘systems’ within Bronfenbrenner’s theory to shape the theoretical framework. From a methodological stance, application of this framework to the data collected allows for clear

explanation of the phenomenon. Through this lens, the various aspects of parental involvement and partnership are situated in the nested ecosystem and categorised as follows:

Microsystem (school, family, community)

- Family and community factors
- School policy, leadership style and management

Mesosystem (relationships between microsystems)

- School climate
- Reciprocity
- Teacher Resistance

Exosystem (links between systems that affect the child)

- Parental engagement with learning for improved learner outcomes
- Two-way communication

Macrosystem (politics, culture, value systems)

- Opportunity for Reflective Practice
- Education system including national policy and resource available

Chronosystem (socio-historic context)

- Contextual factors such as the Covid 19 pandemic
- Developments in the education system over time

This allows for critical analysis of the semi-structured interviews by linking back to this framework throughout the Chapter Five: Discussion. In addition to the integrated theoretical framework (Figure 4), Jabareen's (2009) model was adopted to support the development of the conceptual framework for the study (See Appendix B).

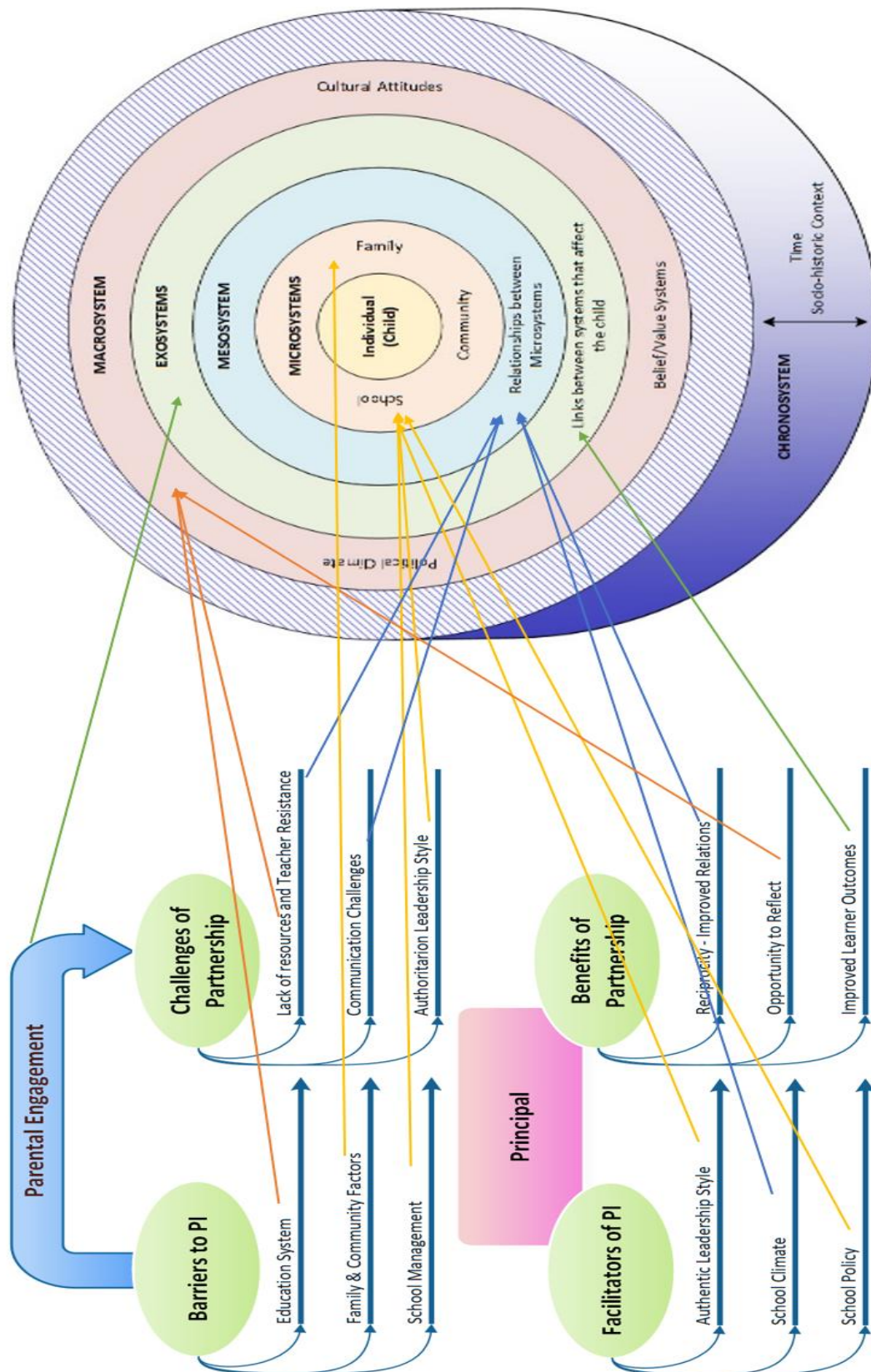


Figure 4. Integration of theory with key concepts from the literature review

2.8.2 Conceptual Framework

Jabareen's (2009) model was a practical tool when formulating decisions relating to suitable theories and concepts for the study. The eight-phase procedure involves: mapping the selected data sources, extensive reading and categorising of the selected data, identifying and naming the concepts; deconstructing and categorising the concepts, integrating the concepts, synthesis, re-synthesis, and making it all make sense, validating and rethinking the conceptual framework (Jabareen, 2009). Following the first three steps of the process as outlined by Jabareen (2009, p. 53), the texts in this chapter were chosen as representative of practices related to PI and partnership and were sourced from multiple media to form the 'empirical data of the conceptual framework analysis'. The fourth phase is most relevant to this chapter as this involves the review, deconstruction and categorisation of the literature. Table 1 (below) is an illustration of how I recorded this phase of the research. This phase was significant to the overall development of the conceptual framework, as it enabled me to critically reflect on the key thinkers and issues relating to PI and partnership; the philosophical assumptions guiding the study; and the suitability of the Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to inform the theoretical framework (Jabareen, 2009, p. 54).

Table 1. Deconstructing and categorizing the concepts adapted from Jabareen (2009)

Concept	Description	Theory (Epistemology/Ontology)	Sample References
Existing views of PI and Partnership	Drives improved learner outcomes Children's school performance, motivation to achieve, discipline, social skills, health conditions and self-esteem	Bronfenbrenner's assertion that child development is enhanced when there is positive interplay between microsystems Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of influence	Desforjes <i>et al.</i> , 2003; Hoover-Dempsey <i>et al.</i> , 2005; Jeynes, 2010
Barriers and facilitators to PI and Partnership identified	Recurring themes focus on the relationships between parents, students, teachers); despite shared goals, actors cultivate different concepts of involvement; how stakeholder characteristics (cultural/material) determine level of PI	Significance of interplay between home and school setting (Exosystem); Value systems (Macrosystem) Epstein's Six Step model to operationalize partnership	Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Hornby and Blackwell, 2018; Brown <i>et al.</i> , 2020
Critical view of PI and Partnership	Gendered, classed, unresponsive to difference; ethnicity, diversity	Critiques of Epstein Critiques of partnership	Crozier, 1998; Carvalho, 2000; Vincent, 2013; Hamlin and Flessa, 2018
Leadership in PI and Partnership	Authentic Culturally responsive Vs Nominal or Tokenistic	Emphasis on Relationships that hold between settings Bronfenbrenner /Goodall/Christenson and Sheridan	Auerbach, 2009; Sanders and Sheldon, 2009; Povey <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Tett and Macleod, 2020
Partnership Theory	Common Findings: Partnership requires material resources, state support, dialogue, leadership	Bronfenbrenner – public policy to develop social systems <i>for and with</i> children to support their wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1975)	Christenson and Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2010; Ishimaru <i>et al.</i> , 2018a

Just as the review of the literature was a continuous process until the very end of the research process, the final four steps of Jabareen's (2009) procedure; integrating the concepts, synthesis, re-synthesis, and making it all make sense, validating and rethinking

the conceptual framework, were iterative throughout. The resulting conceptual framework for the study will be illustrated and discussed in the next chapter.

2.9 Conclusion

This review of the literature regarding parental involvement and partnership has examined some of the main theoretical and practical aspects of the relationship between schools and families. At the outset, the terminology relating to the topic required clarification and so the terms 'parental involvement', engagement and partnership was explored. The differentiated nature of PI was discussed highlighting of issues of gender, class and ethnicity which contribute to the complexity of this aspect of education. Partnership was critiqued as an over-simplified phenomenon which can be agenda-driven and sometimes blind to cultural differences and power relations that exist between families and schools.

Relationships and mutual expectations between home and school were significant and found to depend on strong leadership, communication skills, school policy and school climate which promote PI. Barriers to PI included cultural and socio-economic factors as well as the schools' attitude to working with parents. The concept of parental engagement was foregrounded as a means to build practices to foster relational trust between parents and schools and positively support the development of partnership programmes. The concept of partnership was developed by examining the motivations, benefits and challenges associated with structured programmes for partnership. The research-based partnership framework which forms the basis for the research questions was then introduced. A synthesis of the literature, in the form a concept map, tabulated the categorisation of the key concepts. The key concepts were then linked to the overarching themes of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory forming a theoretical framework for the study. The chapter concluded with an overview of how Jabareen's (2009) phased approach was employed to develop a conceptual framework designed to support the theoretical lens underpinning the study. Further development of the conceptual framework will feature next, as part of Chapter 3: Methodology, which explains the research design and implementation process for this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe the methodological approach adopted for this research. The suitability of a qualitative research design using individual semi-structured interviews will be examined. The discussion will take place in light of the research focus, which aimed to explore primary principals' perceptions and experiences of parental involvement and the Partnership School Ireland initiative. The PSI initiative is supported by the National Parents Council, which supports and promotes parental involvement in education in Ireland.

3.2 The researcher and the research question

The literature review established the pivotal role of school leaders in the formation of PI and partnership in schools. Through this research, I examined the socially constructed concept of parental involvement and partnership in education by listening to colleagues' views and experiences of the same phenomenon. The design of the study followed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews as the primary research instrument to investigate the following research questions:

- How do primary principals perceive parental involvement?
- What were the motivations of primary principals to become involved in the Partnership School Ireland programme?
- How was the PSI programme enacted in schools?
- What are the challenges of becoming involved in a partnership programme
- What are the benefits of becoming involved in a partnership programme
- How did the PSI programme contribute to parent involvement?
- In what ways did school-wide processes or policies change as a result of the work of the partnership team?

3.2.1 Philosophical assumptions in research

Research must always connect to the researcher's philosophical assumptions and worldview (Bryman, 2008). Referred to as research paradigm, Blackman & Moon (2014) explain the relationships between the main elements of paradigm or worldview. They define ontology as 'what exists in the human world that we can acquire knowledge about' and epistemology

as how we create knowledge. Together with epistemology and ontology in research is the concept of axiology which guides decisions around ethical practice, beliefs and values in the presentation of balanced and purposeful research (Killam, 2013). Salomon (1991, p. 14) draws from Bandura (1978) to identify the concept of ‘reciprocal determinism’, which helps us understand the inter-relatedness of the elements. He likens systems of assumptions to ‘constellations’ – radically different and mutually dependent. In terms of a theoretical perspective, there is a long history of division between the positivist and post-positive approaches to research. The polarity of opinion over time resulted in what became known as the ‘paradigm wars.’ Many labels have become associated with this divide, such as Engineering vs Enlightenment (Hammersley, 2002) or Systemic vs Analytic (Salomon, 1991). ~~The binary is based on numeric, objective, value free (quantitative) research versus textual, subjective, value laden (qualitative) research.~~ What is vital, regardless of the model, is that all elements of research design work in concert with the conceptual framework (Trafford and Leshem, 2008, p. 107).

3.2.2 Positivism vs. Post Positivism

Positivist research works on the idea that knowledge and truth can be constructed independently of human participation and are based on a fixed set of variables. Quantitative research is ascribed to a positivist perspective and the use of experimental research design, including true experimental, quasi-experimental and single-subject models Castellan (2010). A positivist stance, associated with quantitative studies, can be viewed as a contrast to interpretive studies, which create a holistic understanding of the studied area (Goldkuhl, 2012). Significant contributions to knowledge in the field of parental involvement have been made using quantitative research methods such as longitudinal studies and large scale surveys (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005; Ice and Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Jeynes, 2012; Hamlin and Flessa, 2018) which form the basis for much of the qualitative research on the topic. These seminal studies informed the literature review in Chapter Two. A post-positive or interpretive stance is underpinned by ‘constructivism, cultural studies, feminism, Marxism, and ethnic studies’ (Castellan, 2010, p. 5). This type of research takes a post-positivist position in which researchers employ qualitative practices such as ethnography, interviews, case studies and phenomenological studies. Qualitative research methods were therefore chosen for this study as 1) the research question sought to understand perceptions and lived experiences of school principals and 2) the research topic is a socially constructed phenomenon requiring an interpretive approach (Green, 2017).

3.2.3 Epistemological, Ontological and Axiological stance

An interpretive epistemology, or theory of knowledge, appreciates a full picture approach to knowledge. Context and relationships are key principles of an interpretive study (Klein & Myers 1999). The interplay of researcher and participants provides a holistic environment in which both parties generate empirical data which is co-created and socially constructed (Goldkuhl, 2012). My ontological sense is that reality can never be separated from human practices, and therefore knowledge will always reflect human perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2013). As an educator, particularly in an early-years setting, my work predominately provides young children with situations and environments that facilitate discovery, meaning-making and mastery as part of a community of learners. Therefore, I extended these interpretive values to my own doctoral learning and selected a qualitative approach to the research.

Ultimately, as educators working in a fully social sphere, the interpretive paradigm offered both researcher and participant the chance to learn, to process and make meaning of our individual and wider contexts in keeping with the theme of the research topic. To clarify what is meant by ‘social’ in the context of the study includes language and behaviour ‘constituted by how acting individuals interact with others in relation to the meaning that those interactions have for the individual’ (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009, p. 314). My view that knowledge is constructed socially determines the research as an interpretivist study. Hence, my epistemological and ontological stances fit with an interpretivist/constructivist worldview. Researchers in the interpretivist/constructivist field often rely on the participants views of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013).

Bronfenbrenner’s (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) ecological systems theory is in keeping with my interpretive stance. The theory fits with my experiences as a professional working in schools over the past twenty years. The linked nature of social spheres is meaningful to me, and I continuously observe how child development is enhanced by positive interactions with trusted adults. I believe that the supportive links between home and school and the interactions between these two ‘systems’ have a bearing on child development and learning. Due to those beliefs, it was important to deliver an ethical, fair and balanced report of the findings which reflects my interpretive axiological stance as a researcher (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

3.3 Conceptual Framework

All aspects of the research process informed the development of the conceptual framework for the study. It was my experience that the framework evolved over time. The inclusion of each element followed each stage of the process from identification of the research questions, to review of the literature, to methodological decisions such as the formulation of the interview schedule as the research instrument. Rather than a series of milestones, this occurred in a cyclical manner, as I gradually developed the skills to make connections between the theories, the findings and the purpose of the study (Leshem and Trafford, 2007, p. 97). The connection between myself, as an interpretive researcher, the topic of research, the design decisions and selection of key theorists and concepts for the study within the literature review process was crystalized by this quote:

It is 'I' who is living in the world with others, alone yet inseparable from the community of others; I who sees and understands something, freshly, as if for the first time; and I who comes to know essential meanings inherent in my own experience. (Moustakas, 1994)

By identifying these important 'boundaries' (Miles and Huberman, 1984), I was then in a position to visualise and locate the theories adopted and apply them to the phenomenon of PI and partnership through the lens of the practice and lived experience of the participants. During the analysis phase, the choice of a qualitative research design following a case study methodological approach was validated as appropriate due to the rich data yielded in the interviews.

3.4 Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative research is suited to topics which describe complex social processes and also people's beliefs, motivations and experiences (Curry, 2015). My decision to conduct research using purely qualitative methods follows Silverman's (2013) observation that 'good' research can provide a 'fresh gaze', is often 'counter-cultural' and 'needs to stand outside the taken-for-granted assumptions that inform our everyday life' (Silverman, 2013, p. 3). Phenomenological research, in this case where the phenomenon is participation in a structured partnership programme, is a design rooted in psychology and philosophy apt to describe 'lived experiences' (Creswell, 2013, p. 42). Therefore, the inductive and context-oriented aspects of the qualitative paradigm, where researcher subjectivity is recognised as

a strength, not a weakness, was seen as fitting to the research design (Silverman, 2000, p. 8).

A case study approach was selected as it aligns with my interpretive epistemology (Ponelis, 2015). This methodology enabled me to gain valuable insight and understanding of the principals' views and lived experiences. Stake (2005) advocated that case study research should resonate broadly with the experiences of a wide cross section of readers facilitating greater understanding of the phenomenon. Essential decisions in the write up of the case study included; how much to make the report a story; level of comparison with other cases; level of generalisations to report or leave to readers naturalistic interpretation; the extent of personal disclosure from researcher to include in the report; and finally, whether participant anonymity should be prioritised (ibid p. 460).

3.4.1 Sampling

Forty-four schools were participating in the Partnership Schools Ireland initiative at the time of this research. This specific group of primary schools is the focus of the study, and therefore a purposive sampling strategy was necessary. Schreier (2018) identifies three ways to select the type of purposive sampling strategies. Firstly, the point in time when the researcher decides may occur in advance of or over the course of the study. In the case of this study, the decision emerged iteratively as a result of the researchers' review of the literature and professional development in the area of research methods. The second criterion involves distinguishing between the sample participants and how they relate to one another. For instance, it was anticipated that contextual factors would affect the impact of the PSI initiative, for example, school types, such as DEIS / Non-DEIS schools, urban/rural, large/small, junior/senior schools. Yin & Davis (2007, p.1) describe initiatives of this nature as 'collective reforms', which involve a wide range of interventions, including curriculum reform, public engagement with meaningful roles and improvement of practices within services. Bryman (2018) states that inadequate sampling frames may be unrepresentative of a group and that refusal to participate may be indicative of behaviour or attitude at a deeper level. Although the Covid 19 pandemic may have negatively impacted the number participants in the study, 16% represented an adequate sampling frame. Finally, sampling should be shaped by the research's specific goal, which may aim to contrast or illustrate similarities among the units in the sample. As the goal of the research was to understand the experiences of principals in engaging with the framework

for partnership with parents, the heterogeneous nature of the group was considered apt for qualitative research.

3.4.2 Recruitment of Participants

In March 2021, the NPC supported the study by affording the researcher some time at the national network meeting of Partnership Schools Ireland to speak briefly and introduce the study. Following these meetings, the NPC also forwarded a recruitment advertisement via email on behalf of the researcher to all participating schools. As a result of this process, two participant schools identified themselves. One participant was recruited after a follow-up email to the initial NPC advertisement. A further four schools volunteered via the researcher's professional network of school principals. Plain Language Statements were circulated to all principals who expressed interest in participating using clear and concise language. At the time of scheduling interviews, Informed Consent Forms were completed by each participating principal and their respective Board of Management. Participants were also sent a draft interview guide and reminded of their rights to anonymity and withdrawal of participation. Just one participant who had committed to participate did not due to work pressure. The recruitment process yielded seven participants in total.

3.4.3 Participant Profile

The research aimed to provide richer, more authentic and comprehensive findings to reveal the lived experiences of school leaders working with the PSI framework, so all participants were primary principals. The participants had varying lengths of experience in the role of principal and were a mix of males and females. Table 3.0 demonstrates the details of the population surveyed. In each participating school, the partnership team was constituted uniformly according to NPC guidance with four/five children and two/three representatives of parents, school staff and community members.

Table 2. Details of Participants in the study

Pseudonym assigned Principal, School Name	Role	Gender	School Type and Ethos	PSI lead	Years as Principal
Fiona, Cremore NS	Principal	F	GNS Roman Catholic Non-DEIS	Principal	10+
Tracey, Macintosh Park NS	Principal	F	Urban Mixed Roman Catholic	Principal	1+
Martin, Ridgewood SNS	Principal	M	Mixed SNS Roman Catholic Non-DEIS	Deputy Principal	20+
Stephen, Coastview Special School	Principal	M	Special Multi-denominational Non-DEIS	Class Teacher	10+
Louise, Aidensfield NS	Retired Principal	F	Urban Mixed Multi-denominational DEIS Band 2	Principal	20+
Orla, Penrose Way NS	Principal	F	GNS Roman Catholic Non-DEIS	Principal/ Class Teacher	20+
Annemarie, Glasmene SNS	Principal	F	Mixed SNS Roman Catholic Non-DEIS	Principal	15+

3.4.4 Organisation of the Research

Organisation of the interviews was managed on password-protected Microsoft TM Excel worksheets which included dates, times, codified references for each school and Zoom call links. A tick box column ensured that participants had acknowledged receipt of Plain Language Statement and returned signed Informed Consent Forms (Appendix C). These forms were concise, plain descriptions of the study to avoid overwhelming participants with information which was not necessary. Based on feedback from the pilot interview, a draft interview schedule was sent to help participants prepare and ensure transparency.

In compliance with DCU REC guidance, DCU Zoom protocols were implemented. Due to the small number of schools participating in the PSI framework, any details which may have compromised the anonymity of participants were not identified in the write-up of findings. The participants were given the opportunity to revisit consent on a continuous basis throughout the process. This system of organising tasks allowed the research to be approached logically, eliminated the margin for error, and contributed to the transferability and dependability of the research process (Shenton, 2004)

3.5 Semi-structured interviews

The research data were drawn from semi-structured interviews to give insight into the details of real-time successful school-based projects. They could bring clarity to more specific aspects of each school's experience. This approach was chosen based on Brown and Danaher's (2019, p. 77) statement that 'semi-structured interviews invite the application of intelligent creativity and thoughtful reflexivity in relation to the broader ethical, methodological and theoretical elements of research.' They note that there is congruence across the literature regarding the 'centrality and the complexity of ethical, respectful and meaningful relationships in such interviews' (ibid, p. 77). As the research aimed to understand the lived experiences of school leaders who have adopted a structured framework for partnership with parents, a purposive sample, as described above, is required. Semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer to moderate the conversation's sequence, pace, and style and allow the interviewees to respond on their own terms (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Silverman (2013) cautions researchers that interviews have become an 'unquestioned resource' in qualitative research and recommends treating participants' responses as 'simply a contingent narrative or account and examine the cultural resources that speakers skilfully deploy'. From the outset, I was aware of my position as a peer of the participants. I anticipated the tension between professional distance and personal acquaintance, which the role of the researcher can bring (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p. 35). I overcame this challenge by committing to design an instrument which reflected the 'gatekeeper' status of the participants, and which accounted for my positionality as an insider in the research.

3.5.1 Interview Schedule

A concise schedule for the semi-structured interviews was developed following protocols described in Kvale (1996) and Hanabuss (1996). These texts were selected as they offered

the novice researcher practical guidance to prepare for gathering qualitative data. The researcher designed the interview schedule to fully encompass the scope of the research question and comprised four distinct sections (See Appendix D). The first four questions were designed to put the participant at ease and gather their thoughts while drawing out their general beliefs and experiences of parental involvement. The next section sought to hear the whole story of the context and challenges within which the participant had set up the partnership team in his/her school. Within this, the researcher identified the rationale for adopting the partnership framework, what issues the establishment of the partnership hoped to address and problems encountered along the way. Next, the researcher asked (Question 7) about the format of meetings to illuminate the nature of communication at the partnership meetings and find out what type of dialogue had taken place.

Questions 8-16 allowed participants to describe changes in their school community brought about by the partnership programme. Participants were then asked directly if their engagement with the PSI programme had changed their views about parental involvement. Questions 18 and 19 were designed to allow participants to reflect on their own leadership skills and how they had impacted the implementation of the partnership programme and parental involvement in their school overall. Finally, based on the timing of the study, principals were asked about the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on parental involvement and partnership.

3.5.2 Pilot Interview

In preparation for the research study, a pilot interview was carried out in April 2021. Through my professional network, a principal colleague offered to participate in this manner. Pilot interviews offer researchers a ‘test run’, help to focus lines of enquiry and allow researchers to reflect on the nature of the activity in which they are engaged (Sampson, 2004; Chenail 2011). The pilot interview was beneficial as it allowed me to become familiar with the use of the Zoom recordings function. This was an opportunity to practise techniques including open questioning, avoiding double negatives, non-judgement, knowing when to allow silence and not interrupting (Hannabuss, 1996).

Insight was gained into the time frame of the interview. The range of responses was noted, and the need to modify the ordering and wording of some questions was addressed. The participant in the pilot gave generous feedback regarding the experience, which brought about revisions of the research instrument and led to the decision to forward sample

questions to the participants in advance of the interview (See Appendix E). There was a sense of encouragement and confidence building about this research phase. A period of two weeks then passed before commencing the first semi-structured interview to consider the research direction, to ‘take time out’ to reflect on all aspects of the process and to prepare for the data collection phase of the study (Sampson, 2004, p. 390)

3.6 Data collection

The data were gathered during April and June 2021. The principles of ‘no harm’ to participants were applied, which state that participants should not suffer any disadvantage or distress as part of the research process (Resnik, 2017). Flick (2018) specifies that researchers should minimise disturbance to participants’ daily lives. Flick also reminds researchers to avoid being ‘pushy’ or ‘ignorant’ (2018, p.74), meaning that participants should not be pressed on issues they do not wish to discuss and should not have their wish to discuss a point ignored or rushed by the researcher during the interview. These considerations provided a helpful guide as I commenced the data collection phase.

3.6.1 Interviews

A total of seven interviews took place. The response rate equates to approximately a twenty per cent uptake of possible respondents at the time the interviews took place. Undoubtedly, the pandemic was a factor in this regard, causing an increased workload for principals and decreased opportunities for the partnership teams to hold meetings under national guidelines and restrictions. As such, due consideration was given to the time constraints on the participants. All interviews were conducted using Zoom between April and June 2021. This approach was taken after consideration was given to the health and safety risks to both the researcher and the respondents in light of Covid19 restrictions. This medium also represented the best time and cost efficiency for all. My experience of the advantages of Zoom as a research tool was congruent with the findings of Archibald *et al.* (2019), who note benefits such as rapport, the convenience of access, time effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, simplicity and user-friendliness.

Initially, some minutes were spent building rapport through relaxed conversation and including a light description of the study (Rabionet, 2011). This phase was intended to set participants at ease in the online environment, give further reassurances regarding confidentiality and acquire permission to proceed with recording (Hannabuss). There were no technical issues, as all participants seemed to be familiar with the using Zoom platform

for virtual meetings. This was beneficial to the speaker-listener relationship, which may have been hampered significantly if either or both parties were unused to this form of communication and may have reduced participant confidence in the process if it was an unfamiliar mode of meeting. Most participants held the interview in their office at school, outside working hours which led to occasional minor telephone or other interruptions, and the recording was paused in those instances. The duration of each interview was scheduled to be approximately forty-five minutes long. The shortest interview duration was thirty-four minutes, and the longest was one hour. The participant who spoke for the shortest time had the least experience with the partnership programme. The participant who spoke for the longest time had a high interest in the topic and broad experience of parental involvement and partnership across multiple school settings.

3.6.2 Transcription Process

Each interview was recorded in video and audio format and then transcribed using the transcription platforms www.otter.ai, a free service connected to Zoom and www.gotranscript.com (See Appendix F). These were valuable resources for time management but led to errors as some sections were deemed unintelligible. Participant accent, volume and audibility were the main factors which were challenging in the transcription process. Following the generation of two sets of interview transcripts, I thoroughly re-read and cross-checked each text file manually and against the audio version. In some cases, it was essential to re-watch video files to lip-read participants' responses, particularly in two cases where the audio quality was inferior to others. This allowed me to become very familiar with the data and improved my ability to recall gestures and facial expressions to infer meaning as I began to plan for the analysis phase. The transcripts, including the pilot interview, generated a total of one hundred and seven pages and a approximately forty-nine thousand words.

3.7 Data Analysis

Although initially concerned about my lack of research experience, I read extensively on the topic of data analysis and rigour appropriate to qualitative research studies (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Harrison *et al.*, 2017). From this reading, Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis was adopted (Braun and Clarke, 2006a). This decision was made on the grounds of flexibility, suitability to qualitative enquiry and the phased nature of the model appealed to me as a novice researcher. I received training with NVivo software to assist with this aspect of the study. Following Flick (2018), accurate and fair analysis was

attempted using a systematic approach to the coding work and avoiding inference or over-generalisation of statements in the data. This section outlines the stages of data analysis following Braun and Clarke's Six Phase model (2006) and includes images from the Nvivo database created for this study.

3.7.1 Thematic Analysis

Within thematic analysis researchers may focus on the data (inductive) or theory (deductive) when approaching the task of analysing research data to generate themes and produce findings from a study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As this study sought to understand lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices of PI, an inductive style of TA was used mainly. This supported the identification of trends in the data concerning the participants' commentary, known as "'experiential' research which seeks to understand what participants think, feel, and do" (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 297). For Creswell (2013) qualitative research can be both inductive and deductive. As Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory was adopted as a theoretical lens for the study, it significantly influenced the development of research questions and data analysis. When the data was gathered from a series of schools, I then applied the theory to the findings to explain the phenomenon bringing a deductive aspect to the research (Hyde, 2000).

3.7.1.1 Phase One Data Familiarisation and Writing Familiarisation Notes

The researcher intensively examined from June 2021 to September 2021. The researcher gained in-depth knowledge of the data set by re-watching Zoom calls, re-listening to audio versions, and re-reading transcripts of each interview. Through that process I gained in-depth knowledge of my data set. In this phase, I was instantly aware of the importance of integrity and avoiding bias because certain interviews yielded data more aligned with the findings of the literature review and my own experience of partnership than others. I worked to ensure equality of focus on all, not just some, of the data making notes of broad trends in the data. As described above, the transcription process provided significant foundational work for this phase.

3.7.1.2 Phase Two Systematic Data Coding

Following the familiarisation phase, and before uploading the transcripts to NVivo software database, I observed common threads in the data, which enabled me to identify a set of initial twenty-two coding categories. This process is known as open coding and involves

developing and modifying codes as one works through the process (Maguire *et al.*, 2017). I started with eight large colour-coded A3 sheets of paper with general headings. Using corresponding coloured highlighter pens, I worked through the transcripts in search of interesting sections of data that captured data significant to the research question. I made notes in the margins as I read through the transcripts. I noticed much overlap in the participants texts at this point and I was surprised how quickly patterns in responses formed and were referenced repeatedly. Having transferred all transcripts into NVivo, I replicated the hard copy headings and bullet points, converting them to early codes as illustrated in Figure 5. Phase Two Systematic Data Coding.

Phase2 System Data Coding (open coding)						Search Project
Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by		
Barriers	6	18	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
COVID	5	16	11/10/2021 16:34	HC		
Disorienting Dilemma	5	7	11/10/2021 16:30	HC		
Importance of Involvement	5	8	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
Importance of Positive Rapport	5	17	11/10/2021 16:31	HC		
Linking projects to SSE	7	16	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
Local Community	4	8	11/10/2021 16:29	HC		
Meetings	6	20	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
monitoring	6	8	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
Motivation	3	8	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
Observations about the PSI Framework	7	27	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
Parenting	3	5	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
Parents	4	7	11/10/2021 16:29	HC		
Participating in PSI	5	13	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
Recruiting ATP	6	18	11/10/2021 16:32	HC		
School Culture	6	9	11/10/2021 16:31	HC		
SNA	3	4	11/10/2021 16:29	HC		
Students	6	10	11/10/2021 16:29	HC		

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by
Success Stories	7	20	11/10/2021 16:32	HC
Teachers	7	13	11/10/2021 16:32	HC
Valued Concept	6	8	11/10/2021 16:32	HC
Vision	5	13	11/10/2021 16:31	HC

Figure 5. Phase Two Systematic Data Coding

3.7.1.3 Phase Three Generating Initial Themes

The challenge at this point was to progress the coding from a basic matching process to a more critical level of thought and insight. Deep thinking was required, and sections of data were re-read. More detailed annotations and memos were written, and more dynamic connections between the words, phrases and feelings were drawn. A distinction between ‘semantic’ and ‘latent’ codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006b) was important at this stage as the data reflected the participants’ feelings and values on the topic and reported factual events regarding the enactment of the PSI project in their school context. Semantic codes were descriptive and obvious, when principals spoke about practical projects and outcomes, for example, “We were doing a focus on oral language in school self-evaluation, the ATP committee, one of the things they did was we drafted a booklet for tips for parents, for oral language. We did similar tips for parents for the language of tables” (Orla, Penrose Way NS). Latent codes were subtle, such as aspiration for school culture; ‘you want to, you know, project your school with the image of being an open, welcoming, inclusive place’ (Fiona, School); vision “it’s a matter of sitting down and thinking about the challenge in your context and saying, what can we do here to involve parents?” (Orla, Penrose Way NS); and the sense of responsibility of the role ‘I would come across a lot of child protection issues, which when boiled down, came down to sometimes homework. And I felt very strongly that I didn’t want that to be the case’ (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS). Figure 6 illustrates an example of how coding was labelled at this phase of the analysis.

Question: What were the ATP meetings like? Prompt: Similar or different to Staff / Parents Association meetings?		
Response	Semantic Coding	Latent Coding
<i>“The parents involved gained more and more confidence as people took on different aspects of the project, but what really helped with them was the additional training and meetups that were happening as the year went on. We'd see the confidence growing in what they were doing and they could clearly see that they didn't need to defer to me, that I was stepping back from this project. It was everyone's project.”</i>	Confidence grew over time	Structured nature of ATP positive
	Roles were assigned and projects structured	
	Training is important	Extra time and workload
	Meeting frequency	
	Role clarification	Building Leadership capacity
	Parents opportunities to lead	
	Positionality of the principal at ATP (step back to allow others step up)	
	Shared responsibility and credit	

Figure 6. Phase Three Generating Initial Themes

3.7.1.4 Phase Four Developing and Reviewing Themes

Throughout the coding process, but particularly at this important phase, I stepped back from the process and reviewed the work to date. I saw how my position as a peer of the participants might threaten objectivity and risk telling a predetermined story. The balance of coding from transcripts was assessed to ensure that strong voices that validated my personal opinion, or may result in ‘hoped for’ findings were not given weight which may drown out what the data revealed. For instance, my attention was drawn towards mentions of DE guidelines and documents however word frequency filters in NVivo allowed me to establish that these were not as highly referenced as I first anticipated. It was paramount for me to preserve objectivity at this point. While categorising the data, I began to envision

how I would generate and convey the analysis as a series of themes as Figure 7 demonstrates.

Phase4 Develop and Review Themes			
Name	Files	References	
COVID	5	16	
Family School and Community	1	1	
Local Community	4	8	
Parents	4	7	
SNA	3	4	
Students	4	8	
Teachers	7	12	
Leadership	4	12	
Building Leadership Capacity	6	9	
Importance of Positive Rapport	5	17	
School Context	5	9	
Vision	5	12	
Partnership	5	8	
Linking projects to SSE	7	16	
Meetings	6	20	
Monitoring	6	8	
Motivation	3	8	
Observations about the PSI Framework	7	27	
Participating in PSI	5	13	
Recruiting ATP	6	18	
Success Stories	7	19	
PI	6	50	
Barriers	6	18	
Importance of Involvement	5	8	
Parenting	3	5	
Valued Concept	6	8	

Figure 7. Phase Four Developing and Reviewing Themes

3.7.1.5 Phase Five Refining, Defining and Naming themes

To refine and define the themes, I found it essential to revisit my research question repeatedly to guide the analysis and keep an open mind to what the data suggested to “move up the conceptual ladder” (Mihas, 2022, p. 224). I undertook a system of re-checking codes from each phase to ensure their development towards themes which accurately honoured the worldview of informants, provided sufficient evidence for claims, and significantly contributed to theory (Pratt, 2009, p. 857).

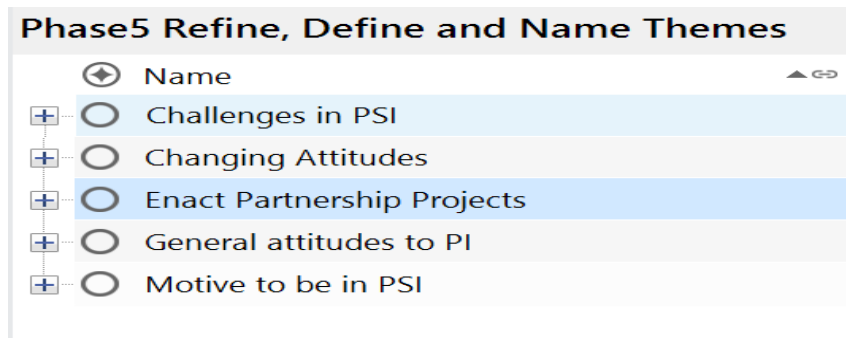


Figure 8. Phase Five Refining, Defining and Naming Themes

Data analysis revealed that participants’ perspectives aligned with much of the literature on PI and that their experiences of partnership appeared to be relatively consistent with key aspects of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory (1979), Epstein’s (2001) Overlapping Spheres of Influence Theory. This congruence enabled me to proceed to Phase Six Writing the Report (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

3.7.1.6 Phase Six Writing the Report

These final five headings provided a structure for me to present the analysis in a way that addresses the research questions in a coherent way and develop Chapter Four, Findings and Discussion.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethics in research means attending carefully to every decision made during the research process to ensure that respect and trust prevail in the researcher and participant relationship (Haverkamp, 2005). Consideration must be given to the risks and benefits to the participants and the community (Resnik, 2017). This includes the employment of competent research methods to accurately reflect the particular context and the aspiration to create socially beneficial policies (Sieber, 2008). When conducting this research, I was guided by the following principles and ethical strategies of the American Psychological Association (*Publication manual of the American Psychological Association : the official guide to APA style*. Seventh edition., 2020). Firstly, I was conscious of my role as a researcher and the multiple roles I occupied within the study. These roles included the collegial aspect of my role as principal and peer of the participants, the fact that I was a fellow participant in the partnership programme and my disposition as a parent. Next, I followed due process to ensure confidentiality by providing informed consent forms, which were approved by participants and their respective Boards of Management. Respect for

confidentiality and privacy was assured to participants by the use of pseudonyms and the omission of any identifying school details.

I was informed by the professional ethical code outlined by Dublin City University. As this initiative is operated by the National Parents Council, in January 2021, the Council's approval was gained for the study to take place (Appendix G) and was included in the submission to the DCU Research Ethics Committee in the same month. When ethical clearance was received in February 2021 (Appendix H), permission was sought from the NPC to contact participant schools.

3.8.1 Insider Research

In the case of this study, as a researcher and as a participant in the partnership programme under examination, it was vital to position myself to guard against bias which reduces the quality and rigour of research. I familiarised myself with DCU Research Ethics Committee Guideline Statement on Insider Research, where the term is defined as the researcher having "direct involvement or connection with the research setting" (DCU Research Ethics Committee, 2017, p. 1). The guidelines alerted me to challenges such as anonymity, confidentiality, managing power implications and possible changes to my value system because of the process.

Positionality in research 'describes an individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context' (Holmes, 2020, p. 1). It was essential to acknowledge my positionality within the research to form a basis for the subsequent deeper analysis of the data, which is essential to thematic analysis in research (Braun and Clarke, 2013). As a colleague and peer of the participants, I observed that the combination of my valuable understanding of the topic needed to be balanced with a level of objectivity to appreciate other points of view (Costerly, 2010). Chavez (2008) outlines the advantages of insider research which include nuanced perspective, the expediency of rapport, access and insight into the language and behaviours of the participants, all of which were beneficial to me. The complications of insider status I experienced ranged from over-identification with participants to the risk of 'selective reporting' and familiarity with participants all of which posed potential risk of bias (Chavez, 2008, p. 479).

3.8.2 Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is informed by his or her own positioning, identity, standpoint, methods and perspective (Clarke and Braun, 2019) and forms the ‘unshakeable connection’ between the researcher and the research methods used (Moustakas, 1990, p. 11). Awareness of the researcher’s positionality in the research, attention to detail in appropriate methods, selection of instruments and contextual sensitivity all exist in this domain. A reflective log (see Appendix I Reflective Log) was kept in line with Mertens (2017, p.17) belief that ‘ethically, researchers need to examine who they are and who they are in relation to the community in which they are working.’ I was aware that my background affected the research topic, shaped the research question and would be reflected in the methods, finding and framing of conclusions (Malterud, 2001). Cognisant that responsible research is self-critical, reflective and self-aware (Ledwith, 2017), the use of leading questions was avoided and every effort was made to carry out the interviews objectively. During the period when interviews took place, a reflective journal was an important resource for refining the questions and eliminating bias. For Kenny (2012), the researchers own experience is the starting point for any enquiry:

It requires that there is a personal experience that has left the inquirer with a desire to understand the experience more fully. The heuristic process involves getting inside the research question, becoming one with it and living it. In this respect, it is the question that chooses the researcher. Kenny (2012, p. 7)

I was encouraged by participants’ responses to my updates and member checking through the process. The participants generously shared the accounts of partnership and parental involvement, and this served as motivation to present the data as rigorously as possible.

3.8.3 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research denotes the ‘degree of confidence in the data’ (Connelly, 2016, p. 435), interpretation, and the methodology used to guarantee the quality of a research study. Trustworthiness is based on rigorous, high-quality methods and data collection procedures (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). Central to a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is the idea that reality and all interpretations are socially constructed, which must be analysed ‘holistically’ rather than as individual variables or parts. Lincoln and Guba (1986) categorised the essential components of trustworthiness in qualitative studies as credible, dependable, transferable and confirmable. Credibility may be achieved by extensive engagement with the phenomenon, debriefing and member check practices and

triangulation. Audit trails and external neutral checking of the methods promote dependability and confirmability (Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba, 2007).

Authenticity, a fifth layer of trustworthiness, draws the reader into an accurate recount of the participant's experiences by sensitively revealing the true mood, feeling, context and language (Polit and Beck, 2008). Researchers who can clearly show and describe that measures were in place throughout the whole research process assure quality and give confidence to the data, interpretation, and methods employed (Polit and Beck, 2008). Following Shenton's (2004) strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, I worked to meet each of these criteria throughout the study. Credibility was achieved through the use of established, recognised research methods using iterative questioning in data collection dialogues and debriefing sessions between the researcher and supervisors which took place regularly. A description of the background, qualifications and experience of the researcher was provided. In November 2021, I wrote to each participant to update them on the study's progress. I sketched the initial findings from the data which were available to me at the time. I sought preferences on possible pathways for the use of pseudonyms (Allen and Wiles, 2016). I offered an opportunity to comment based on the preliminary findings. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw participation at any stage.

Transferability was addressed by the provision of adequate background data to establish the context of the study and a detailed description of the topic in question to allow comparisons to be made. Dependability and confirmability are addressed in this chapter by the in-depth methodological description to allow the study to be repeated, admission of the researcher's beliefs and assumptions, and recognition of shortcomings in the study's methods and their potential effects. Such description allows the integrity of research results to be scrutinised and the use of diagrams and NVivo records to demonstrate the "audit trail". For authenticity, an account was given of specific school contexts, history, legacy, emotive expressions were noted, using a combination of review of video and audio content.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter described the research design and methods adopted for this study on parental involvement and partnership. The interpretive research paradigm of the researcher was discussed, including the researcher's epistemology, ontology and axiology. These philosophical assumptions were then integrated into a description of how a conceptual framework for the study was developed.

Next, the research was identified as a qualitative study and elements of the design were explained, including; the sampling scheme, participant profile, organisation of the research and the recruitment of participants. The suitability of the main research tool, a semi-structured interview, was discussed, with reference to the development of the interview schedule (Kvale, 1996) and the pilot interview process. The data collection process, i.e. interviews and transcription, were documented, followed by an account of the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) approach, which was employed for this study. Finally, the ethical considerations applied to the study, including insider research, reflexivity, trustworthiness, and limitations, were explained. Congruent with Phase Six of Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach to thematic analysis, the next chapter reports on the findings of the research.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This research explores primary school principals' perceptions and practices of parental involvement and partnership with reference to their experience of the Partnership School Ireland (PSI) programme. Seven primary school principals were interviewed about their perspective on parental involvement in general and how the partnership programme was enacted in each school. In particular, the research explored the benefits of and barriers to parental involvement, the motivations to become involved in the PSI programme, how the PSI programme was enacted in each school and the advantages and challenges of the PSI framework experienced by each principal.

The research questions were:

- How do primary principals perceive parental involvement?
- What were the motivations of primary principals to become involved in the Partnership School Ireland programme?
- How was the PSI programme enacted in schools?
- What are the challenges of becoming involved in a partnership programme?
- What are the benefits of becoming involved in a partnership programme?
- How did the PSI programme contribute to parent involvement?
- In what way did school-wide processes or policies change as a result of the work of the partnership team?

Themes generated through the analysis of raw data are portrayed here in the order in which they were developed, sometimes referred to as an archaeological presentation style (Chenail, 2011). The interview schedule influenced the sequence in which themes developed to some extent but only partially. The findings are presented as five main themes, with constitutive subthemes detailing specific discoveries and observations, illustrated in Table 3.0.

Table 3. Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Principals' Understandings of Parental Involvement (PI)	PI as beneficial to children Benefits of PI in Special Education settings Summary of the benefits of PI
Motivations for involvement in a partnership programme	Contextual needs of individual schools Compliance with DE requirements School Self-Evaluation (SSE)
Enactment of the partnership programme in individual schools	Facilitating Action Team for Partnership (ATP) meetings Reflections on leading the partnership programme Projects of the Partnership School Ireland Programme
Challenges of involvement in the partnership programme	Recruitment and Turnover of ATP team members Managing Workload Operating the PSI programmes during Covid19 pandemic
Changed perceptions	Partnership as action Partnership as an alternative form of PI

4.2 Principals' Understandings of Parental Involvement (PI)

Principals perceived involvement to be of value schools and to children in terms of attendance, behaviour and learning outcomes. The principals appreciated the parents' contribution to school life through forms of PI such as volunteering and fundraising. Increased mutual understanding to build teacher empathy and support families of children with special educational needs was identified as a benefit of PI. The overall picture presented was that a positive school climate and a sense of community are closely associated with good levels of PI. The concept of PI was portrayed as essential to school life and 'not an 'add-on' at all' (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS). As school leaders, the principals outlined how they worked to create and sustain levels of PI in their schools. This aspect of their leadership was depicted as a cycle of building relationships in the school community to foster and maintain PI. The findings are presented as three subthemes: the benefits of PI, challenges to PI and building PI.

4.2.1 Benefits of Parental Involvement (PI) to schools

Benefits to schools were identified as parents volunteering and access to parents' skillsets. Parents' participation on Parents' Associations (PA) and Boards of Management (BOM) which support the organisation of schools was acknowledged by all participants as a benefit of PI. However, these structures are mandatory and essential to the functioning of Irish primary schools (Bennett, 2015). On one level, parents assisted by bringing a range of skills to school activities such as fundraisers, coffee mornings, in-class support, and parent classes (Louise, Aidentsfield ETNS; Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS; Tracey, Macintosh Park NS). On another level, Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) said the school depended on access to parents' skillsets from outside education, which can benefit the school. These included technical, professional, or other skills not directly relating to education but helpful to running the school. Tracey acknowledged that school staff could become 'institutionalised' at times, so fresh perspective coming from parent knowledge and expertise is welcome:

You need somebody else to point out to have you tried this, or have you thought about this, we're so non-stop. We're so used to operating within our four walls and knowing what works and what doesn't work and our way of thinking, but it's good to be forced to rethink a little bit or to have that other perspective. (Tracey, Macintosh Park NS)

Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) also referenced parents' skillsets and parent input into school policy development as benefits of involvement. Martin said there was a need to raise awareness of the potential value of parents' skillsets among principals:

As teachers, we bring our set of skills and as parents, we bring a set of skills, and partnership is using that complementarity of skills, that big word, has always stuck with me you know, just that my parents would bring a set of skills to the table that we may not have. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS)

Stephen (Coastview Special School) considered that some parents may prefer to lend practical skills, to projects like painting and decorating than financially supporting the school 'a lot of people just would like to help in some way and maybe go beyond the voluntary contributions route'. Conversely, Tracey (Macintosh Park NS) spoke positively of a recent fundraiser which resulted in the purchase of new outdoor furniture for the school 'The PA did the fundraising...and raised the exact amount of money we needed' Tracey (Macintosh Park NS). The connection between fundraising and PI is further discussed as a challenge to PI in this chapter.

Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) felt that teachers benefit from PI as a helpful means to understand their students. She stated that teachers ‘can get a better understanding of what’s going on, or understand the struggle, perhaps that parents have’ which, she said often manifests in child behaviour; ‘On that level, in terms of understanding the children we work with, I think that’s (PI) the most crucial part of it’ Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS).

4.2.1.1 PI as beneficial to children

There was broad agreement among all participants regarding the benefits to children, particularly parental support of homework, school meetings, events and school attendance. These types of activities align with a school-based view of parent involvement which has developed over time (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005; Auerbach, 2009; Horvat, Weininger and Lareau, 2016; Tett and Macleod, 2020). Principals were aware of research on PI and drew on this in a general way to support their views without referring to specific evidence; ‘I’ve always felt that parents should be involved in schools and in their children’s education, and research backs that up’ (Orla, Penrose Way). A sense of duty around PI was evident in Fiona’s remark that ‘it behoves us all as principals to strengthen those links between home and school because I think that can only be an advantage to the children’ (Fiona, Cremore NS). Principals spoke about PI as a means of optimising the educational experience for children:

to give every child in the school the best possible experience of school, and the best opportunity to learn and to be the best she can be. And I honestly don’t believe we can do that by ourselves. I think we need parents to back us up. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

Orla’s comments reveal a perception that collaboration between schools and parents positively impacts children’s educational experiences ‘the common purpose is that we want children to flourish, and to grow and to learn and to have every opportunity to learn and have the tools and the skills to learn as they progress.’ (Orla, Penrose Way NS). It can be the case, though, that teachers and parents have very different views about PI and each other’s roles which is often the cause of conflict and tension (Nakagawa, 2000; Vincent, 2013). Orla felt that role clarification was important and how she explains this regularly to parents; ‘We’re not major miracle workers, so, we need your help here’ (Orla, Penrose Way NS).

Principals spoke of children's outcomes as dependent on the level of social capital they possess. Social capital is a resource built on norms, networks and trust which is associated with achieving common social objectives and is often associated with parent involvement in education (Temple, 2002, p. 32; Povey *et al.*, 2016; Vincent, 2017). Parental involvement is a resource for children to improve their skills and development but like other forms of social capital, "its value and eventual benefit to educational outcomes depends on the availability of economic, human and cultural capital" (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012, p. 16). Thus, in theory children from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds benefit more from involved parents due to resources which can be transferred through this relationship, but only when something of value to children's education is transferred (*ibid*). Fiona (Cremore NS) said that the children of parents who are involved in the Parents' Association are 'clued into school'. Fiona felt these children were at an advantage and that the connection between home and school reduced the likelihood of behaviour and attendance issues:

Parents who are on committees, you know, like such as the ATP, or a Parent Association Committee or whatever, anything that brings them into the school, you find that that does improve, and apparently, statistically, that does improve outcomes for children. It improves learner outcomes. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

This insight indicates Fiona's positive disposition towards the PI and a belief that parents' membership on a committee can improve student outcomes. Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) also noted that there is a benefit to children when their parents become involved in school life and how such relationships have the effect of building community:

I also think, from the children's perspective, the benefit for them to see their parents involved within the school is hugely important, particularly at primary school level. So, and again, then those positive relationships spill out into the community, and then there's a greater sense of connection with the schools and the community. (Annemarie, Glasmene Senior NS)

The perceived 'win-win' for all stakeholders was best summed up in Fiona's (Cremore NS) description of parental involvement as something well worth working for:

The main thing that would motivate you to want to strengthen the links is because you know that it's a win-win. It's good for the children. If it's going to improve their outcomes, as we said, but it's also good for the school, because I think all schools want to be rooted in their communities. And I think if you don't begin with a good bond with your parents, well, then you've lost it. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

The assumption that all parents are homogenous and available to participate in school-based types of PI such as committees and voluntary projects, somewhat hides the fact that the modern discourse of parenting fails to acknowledge the classed, gendered and racialised by nature setting middle class parents at a distinct advantage (Lareau, 2000; Crozier and Reay, 2005; Vincent, 2017).

4.2.1.2 Benefits of PI in Special Education settings

Stephen (Coastview Special School) suggested that the success or failure of a child's placement in a special school can often depend on the school's ability to promote parental involvement:

It's a jigsaw, but the parenting piece of the puzzle is the much bigger piece of the puzzle. If you can get that, then it's greater than the sum of its parts. It's the tipping point, if you can get the parents on board and the wider family, then you'd be pretty well on your way to having a really successful placement. (Stephen, Coastview Special School)

Stephen explained how parents of children with significant behaviour needs can be at 'rock bottom' when they are placed in a special school due to negative experiences in previous school placements. He described the benefits experienced in terms of a stable school placement by encouraging PI in his school, primarily by building and maintaining rapport as is described by the principals in the next section.

4.2.2 Challenges to parental involvement

The principals identified challenges to involvement, including communication between home and school, parents' lack of time for PI and teacher resistance. The principals discussed measures they sometimes engaged in to mitigate these challenges, which are also described in this section.

4.2.2.1 Communication difficulties between home and school

Good communication between home and school is the foundation of quality parental involvement (Hornby, 2000; Cox-Petersen, 2010). Principals identified communication difficulties arising from literacy, language and distance barriers in the study. Orla (Penrose Way NS) said English language difficulties and parent literacy levels hampered involvement. Orla (Penrose Way NS) recounted how she had recently been stopped outside the school gate by a parent waving an information note she had sent home, asking, 'What's in this? I'm not able to read!'

Fiona (Cremore NS) recalled that holding parent-teacher meetings via phone was difficult; 'we would have a high number of international students, and straightaway, some of them would be at a disadvantage speaking over the phone, and you know, with English' (Fiona, Cremore NS). Fiona was keen to overcome hindrances to good communication 'you want to feel that you have that open-door policy with them (parents), that you're talking to them at different times, that you're keeping in constant contact, even if it's by messages on Aladdin Connect'⁶ (Fiona, Cremore NS). Parents' confidence, level of education and view of their role in their child's education may be a barrier to school engagement (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Opening strong two-way channels of communication was a starting point for Orla (Penrose Way NS) in the creating communication 'I think that that whole culture of welcome and inclusiveness and even parents feeling they can ring and say, look, I have a bit of a problem today. I think that's the first thing that needs to happen' (Orla, Penrose Way NS). Orla's efforts are indicative of bridging a gap which she identified in the early days of her career as principal:

One of the things I really wanted to address was that barrier between school and home and the whole 'them and us' mentality. The whole, this is the front door and we'll come to the front door and you can come to the front door, but neither of us is going to cross the threshold either direction. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

In the case of Coastview Special School, Stephen felt that the inability to meet parents regularly, and in person, was a limitation in his school context. As children in his school avail of school transport, they are 'bussed in and out', so opportunities to access parents for informal updates daily, were not available to him:

The downside, I guess is that you can't you can't just lean over the gate and have a daily handover. Our handover is a little bit more formal it would have to be in the form of a good note home or a letter home and or it will be a phone call, which is more difficult to manage. (Stephen, Coastview Special School)

Without face-to-face access to parents, Stephen felt he needed to work harder on communication by phone, letter and email to build a trusting rapport all of which are associated with a positive school climate (Epstein, 2001; Marshall, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005).

⁶ Aladdin Connect is a mobile app used by schools to communicate with parents

4.2.2.2 The limited availability of parents' time

Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) identified that levels of involvement had reduced in recent years as parents were increasingly in employment in his school area. He said parents no longer had as much free time for involvement in or volunteering for, school-based activities. Martin identified that a lack of staffing and an increase in parents working outside the home were challenges which brought the operation of parent support groups to an end in his school:

We started a parent and toddler group as well, very early on, again, as a way of integrating our newcomer parents particularly, with a drop-in, so maybe Tuesdays and Thursdays, and we'd set it up the beginning of the year, but then it had to be self-sustaining because I couldn't, myself and (Deputy Principal) couldn't provide the staff to run it. So, the parents did a really good job of that. But again, over the years that kind of started to wither somewhat, because more parents are working and children were in creches rather than in the home, but like, so that would be one thing, I would say... economic. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS)

Martin's experience highlights that economic factors determine levels of PI (Carvalho, 2000; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009; Pavlakis, 2018). Parent involvement may fluctuate according to the period, i.e. economic upturn/downturn or due to the Covid19 pandemic.

Louise set realistic expectations of parents in the school community:

For some parents just being welcomed into the school or attending meetings for them maybe that's all the time that they can give but that's also very important. I suppose I needed to respect that not everybody's going to be banging down the door and wants to be involved. (Louise, Aidsfield ETNS)

Louise's view demonstrates an understanding that not all parents are in a position to volunteer or commit extra time to school events (Nakagawa, 2000). One participant countered the idea of parents' time for school-based PI by referencing parents' responsibility to support children's education in the home setting. Orla (Penrose Way, NS) recounted how she explained the importance of home-based PI to parents by highlighting the percentage of time that children spend in the school setting compared to the home or other settings:

If you take a school year, from the 1st of September to the 31st of August, children spend 11% of that year at school. Now, there are so many expectations around what school can do and you know, what school should do. It's 11% of a child's time, in the year. So, I always say to parents, we need your help here. Because you know, you can't expect your child to flourish, and to learn and to make them the best possible progress if you're depending on 11% of her time, no matter what we do. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

This strong appeal for home-based PI reveals Orla's asset-based view of parents, her understanding of the importance of engagement with parents (Goodall, 2018b) and a clearly defined expectation of co-operation. Harris and Goodall (2008, p. 50) associate this view with shared vision and purpose expressed as 'every parent genuinely matters' and 'every parent is reachable'.

4.2.2.3 Teachers' resistance to PI

Participants knew that teacher resistance was a potential barrier to parental involvement. Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) thought that teacher resistance might stem from a fear of 'unpredictability'. Annemarie suggested that teachers are more accustomed to controlling classroom situations and worry that outside influences may disrupt that control. She elaborated by stating that parents were in effect strangers 'We're dealing with members of the public that we really don't know at the start of a school year, and there's no relationships established.' Annemarie contrasts teacher fear with the outlook of the school principal:

As principal you have perspective, a broader view of the workings of the school. And, you know, you see the need for parental involvement to benefit all. So, the key for me is how the principal communicates with the staff. (Annemarie, Glasmene Senior NS)

Tracey (Macintosh Park NS), demonstrated sensitivity towards her staff and reflected with empathy on one cause of teacher resistance to PI:

I think teachers can often be very nervous of having parents involved in school because they feel they're being judged... people quickly realise you need as many bodies as you can get, and while we can put a certain amount of support teachers in there, you still need more. (Tracey, Macintosh Park NS)

This suggests that when teachers see the benefit of parent involvement in school life, resistance may begin to diminish. One principal stated that 'at times teachers have a suspicion of parents based on a cycle of negative interactions' (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS). Louise (Aidensfield ETNS), worked on developing mutual respect formed the basis of a welcoming atmosphere, which reduced teacher resistance to PI; 'it was really important for us to develop a welcoming and a mutual respect there, and a non-judgmental type of relationship' (Louise Aidensfield ETNS). Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) spent time encouraging teachers who were anxious before parent/teacher meetings; 'you have to work hard at that to make sure that it's shared across the school with all the teachers' (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS).

I visibly march around the school, and I chat with the parents and we shoot the breeze and all the rest of it, but the vast majority of parents want to speak well of you as a teacher, and want to speak well of the school, because they're so invested in the school with their children there. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS)

Martin was aware that teachers observed this and said he bolstered confidence by reminding staff of the positive interaction after the meetings had ended; 'Invariably at the end of the process they will tell you how positive it was, and how good it was' (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS).

4.2.2.4 Parents' Association over-emphasis on fundraising

Parents were identified as a financial resource in terms of fundraising, which was mostly the responsibility of the Parents' Association. Principals in the study were concerned that Parents' Associations focussed mainly on fundraising. Orla (Penrose Way NS) said; 'I think sometimes Parents' Associations with the best will in the world, they tend to fall into the fundraising side of things.' Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) recognised that parents can contribute more than just fundraising 'what parents can bring to the table, and it's not just fundraising, you know, the parents can be such an important asset' (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS). Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) aired some frustration that parents in her school saw the function of the Parents' Association as purely related to fundraising; 'the maddest of ideas would come up, like, going down to the shopping centre with buckets collecting money and you're going, "No, we can't do that". And everything was no, we can't do that.' (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS). Schools and families can sometimes have differing views on what effective PI involves (Nakagawa, 2000; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009). Louise sought the support of the NPC to help to clarify the purpose of the committee; 'I had the NPC in several times to talk to us. And they were extremely helpful, but it lacked structure' (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS).

4.2.2.5 Summary of the Challenges to PI

The principals outlined a number of challenges relating to parental involvement, including; communication difficulties between home and school due to language and literacy issues, the limited availability of parents' time, teachers' resistance to PI and concern that Parents' Associations may over-emphasise their role as fundraisers. While discussing the challenges, the principals balanced their responses with explanations of how they resolve such hindrances in a cycle of efforts to build and maintain PI which are outlined in the next section.

4.2.3 Building and fostering PI

While there are challenges when trying to involve parents, principals in the study explained how they worked towards building and fostering PI in their schools through positive interactions with parents in their school communities. The influence of the principal on levels of parental involvement and positive school climate is well established (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009, p. 38; Jeynes, 2011).

Parent involvement was a priority when Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) set up a new school several years ago to meet a growing demand for school places in an urban area. There was a diverse cohort of students, whose parents had little or no experience with the Irish education system, and many parents did not speak English. For Louise (Aidensfield ETNS), getting parents involved and ‘on board’ helped to build mutual understanding (Brewster and Railsback, 2003):

It was a huge thing for me as principal and obviously, for the staff, that we were welcoming that we try to get the parents on board and, you know, to have a greater understanding of what the education system was like. And it was also really important for us, because I suppose, parenting was so diverse among our group of parents, you know. And their expectations and ideas of schooling were very, very diverse as well, it was really important for us to have some sort of unity and for us to have a greater understanding of our parent population. Really, that was the big, big thing for me! (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS)

The two-way relationship between home and school was critical to Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) as the school attempted to create a harmonious multicultural setting. This indicates a will to create strong links between home and school environments. In Aidensfield ETNS having parents ‘on board’ seemed central to creating a sense of community. Annemarie stressed the integral nature of parental involvement to the operation of school by stating ‘parental involvement is crucial, critical, even to the success of the school, the partnership of parents, staff and school community underpins everything we do, and the school can’t function properly without it’ (Annemarie, Glasmene Senior NS). In particular, Annemarie said that PI helped staff to get to know parents and to understand better the children they work with and where they were ‘coming from’, thus building a sense of community.

In the context of a special school, Stephen (Coastview Special School) built relationships with parents by using first name terms, offering support from the outset and described ‘breaking those moulds’ and ‘making sure that that the relationship is everything with parents.’ He drew on prior experience to justify forging strong bonds as an investment:

That will serve you in the future because you will have difficult conversations to have with them. Like I say the days that you pick up the phone, they might think you're ringing in with bad news, and you've actually got something good to say or just passing on information. But then the days when you have got to have that difficult conversation, you've put in all those hard yards in advance and you've paved the way, have been very supportive, and you're going to support them through this as well. I have to say, even if it's an expulsion, you can still be very supportive and not make it personal. (Stephen, Coastview Special School)

The remarks illustrate how the leadership traits of being forthcoming, welcoming, and honest serve Stephen well (Stynes, 2014, p. 183). Stephen (Coastview Special School) was acutely aware of his position as the 'face of the school'. There is a strong sense of pastoral leadership from Stephen's accounts of positive communication with parents, which acknowledges and supports the worth of every individual (Louis, Murphy and Smylie, 2016).

Principal approachability in the form of availability and openness to parents was important to all the school leaders in the study. Three principals spoke about maintaining a presence outside the school gate morning and evening to address people personally (Orla, Penrose Way NS; Tracy, Macintosh Park NS; Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS). Leading in this way, sometimes called 'managing by walking around' (Serrat, 2017, p. 2), builds rapport and helps resolve issues quickly. Stephen used the term 'the power of the school gate' to describe the significance of this type of leadership from his perspective:

Circulating around and seeing everybody, but then you know, access is total, but you wouldn't know, as a principal, what you will come across each day. So, if you're under a bit of pressure, you know, you could be getting a lot of good banter and different things to solve that day. (Stephen, Coastview Special School)

This awareness of the need for approachability was summed up humorously by Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS), as he described maintaining a presence safely during Covid19 restrictions, 'I have my spot, I'm part of the lamppost! I stand out by the lamppost in the corner of the campus, near the front gate, so if ever a parent needs me, they know I'm there'. This presence indicates Martin's approachability which builds the foundation for positive relationships between home and school (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009).

4.2.4 Summary of Principals' Understandings of Parental Involvement

In this section the principals' outlined their understandings of PI including the associated factors which facilitate or create barriers for schools and parents. The principals gave

insights into an aspect of their leadership which involves fostering and building relationships in which positive links between home and school are cultivated. To examine why these principals were motivated to move beyond good levels of PI towards a structured partnership approach, they were asked to elaborate on their reasons for adopting the PSI programme in their schools, which is discussed next.

4.3 Motivations for involvement in a partnership programme

When reporting on their motivations for becoming involved in the PSI programme, principals presented a variety of reasons for becoming involved. The motives ranged from enhancing school reputation, context-specific needs of the school and compliance with DE requirements. This section contains examples of principals employing the PSI model to meet DE standards, including Partners and Looking at our Schools 2022 (Department of Education, 2022) and also referring to the Student Parent Charter Bill (Oireachtas, 2019). The evidence of schools applying the PSI model to the school self-evaluation (SSE) processes was substantial. The PSI framework requires schools to document processes of collaborative decision-making for school improvement and may therefore support schools' efforts to reach DES standards. Partnerships are often associated with improving efficiency within organisations (Brinkerhoff, 2002). As the following section reveals, the opportunity to effectively employ the PSI programme to combine parent involvement, school improvement and SSE was not lost on any participants.

4.3.1 Contextual needs of individual schools

In two of the sites, the issue of the school's negative reputation within the local community was a motivation to become involved in the partnership programme. Orla (Penrose Way NS) described her early career as a principal and the need to become involved in the partnership programme as a means to address a negative public image of the school dating back over generations in the local community:

A big one here for us, it might not be the case in every school, was certainly in our school, you know, we'd have families who've lived in the area for generations. And you know, grandmothers and mummies would not have great memories of their time at school. Some of them, not all of them, but some of them... (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) spoke about his motivation to establish the school in an urban area to provide a centre to foster belonging and connection almost twenty years ago. This goal was linked to his personal experience, vision and leadership style. Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) related the decision to participate in the partnership programme

with a personal interest in home school links carried forward from previous experience as a Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teacher:

That's my vision, and that's where I'm coming from, you have to work hard at that to make sure that it's shared across the school with all the teachers. One of the things when you're talking about partnership, one of the definitions we had of a partnership that really stuck with me when I was a home school liaison teacher was partnership, is the complementarity of skills that we bring. (Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS))

The role of HSCL teacher is allocated in DEIS schools (areas of socio-economic disadvantage). Galvin et al. (2009) noted that such a resource would contribute to more successful family-school partnerships in an Irish context. A partnership approach helped Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) to fulfil this goal of connecting the school to the local community:

We've always gotten involved, and we would see ourselves as the heart of the community, and the community's heart of us. That's how our school is viewed, and I suppose with the Action Team that's another spoke in what we do. It's an important one. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS).

There is a sense of Martin's attachment to his school community in this description, along with a concern about how the school is viewed and that the school carries a good reputation. Epstein (2001) posits that a partnership approach creates 'school-like families' and 'family-like schools'. School leaders with a clear mission to establish collaboration with parents and a culture of inclusion in communities enhance student and stakeholder outcomes (Francis and Gross, 2016). Whether seeking to overcome past negative perceptions of the school or establish a new school in a community, it was clear that principals were motivated to build a partnership to promote the school's positive reputation within the community.

In Cremore NS, it would seem that there was a desire to raise the profile of the school in response to changes to the local demographic as the population became increasingly diverse; 'You want to increase the profile of your school in the community, and you want to get a positive message out there. And you won't get that by having your doors closed to the parents.' (Fiona, Cremore NS). Fiona is aware of her role as a 'relationship builder' in the school community. Parents' perceptions of whether they feel welcome to be involved in school activities are linked to the principals' attitude towards them (Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014).

Fiona (Cremore NS) considered the PSI to be a 'useful vehicle' to help foster a welcoming atmosphere for parents who were new to the area 'a lot of our families would be newcomer families, and Eastern European families, and a lot of the migrant population, we do feel it's very important to be extra welcoming of them.' Fiona (Cremore NS). Schools can address cultural and language barriers in many ways through various strategies, including a welcoming atmosphere and communication presented in multilingual formats (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Auerbach, 2007, p. 279). As Fiona recalled, the ATP projects helped her school communicate a positive, welcoming image during a time of change:

The whole structure of our school, the whole culture of our school, has changed dramatically. You want that to be seen as a positive thing in the community. For that reason, I think the ATP was very useful, a useful vehicle to do that and to go out. I suppose we need to do more projects that involve going out into the community. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

Orla (Penrose Way NS) was also motivated to join the programme to broaden parent representation in her school to reflect diversity in her school:

I suppose I saw it as an opportunity maybe to involve parents who weren't involved in the Parents' Association, you know, kind of weren't very active in the Parents Association and I also saw it as an opportunity to involve a parent who didn't speak English as their first language. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) remembered her discomfort that a Parents' Association had been set up, which in her words; 'wasn't representative of our parent body and I felt very uncomfortable about that'. The school was new with a transient population. Louise sought an alternate avenue to establish a school and community foster mutual understanding:

The school is like walking on quicksand. The way it's so changing and the population is so transient. There was a lack of understanding of the Irish education system as a holistic educational system. Also, I suppose, for us trying to understand where the parents were coming from, or why they felt these ways, was really important to us as well. I really felt from day one, it was vitally important that we try to understand our parent body, and that it was a reciprocal understanding there' (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS)

The motivation of school leaders to build trust through partnership, especially with parents who occupy marginal societal positions, is significant (Giles, 2006). In the above examples, the principals may be viewed as working to create more open and inclusive school communities.

4.3.2 Compliance with DE requirements

Schools in Ireland are directed to meet DE standards by engaging in a range of activities, including school improvement planning, the implementation of legislation and school self-evaluation. One principal was motivated to set up PSI to meet the requirements of ‘Looking at our Schools’ (Department of Education, 2022), a quality framework which sets standards for schools in Ireland under the two headings of Teaching and Learning and Leadership:

I'm increasingly using LAOS in terms of, it's not perfect, but it gives you a very good handle on what good teaching looks like for our teachers, and particularly good leading and what good leadership is about as well. And when you look at the objectives of ATP, you're pinging all over the place with Looking at our Schools, and what's involved. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS)

Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) draws a direct connection between DE standards and the objectives of the PSI programme. The NPC defines the aims of the PSI as follows ‘Better outcomes for children are the main objectives of a “Partnership School”, achieved by the whole school community, planning and working together on agreed activities’ (*Partnership Schools Ireland | National Parents Council*, 2020). The Action Team for Partnership (ATP) possibly offers schools a forum which is representative of the student, staff, parents, and local community for collective decision-making in line with DE expectations. The role of the principal is key in leading such collaborative activity, so a structured framework to facilitate this task may serve as a motivation. Schools are mandated to establish Parents’ Associations under legislation (Department of Education, 2022a). Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) reflected that the ATP might be a ‘preferred avenue to support the school’ for some parents:

What they have contributed has been extraordinary, their passion for education, their passion for our school, their passion for achieving and then actioning it. They were people who, it wasn't just words, they went out and they made it happen, and they are two people who are not on a Parents’ Association, nor had put themselves forward for a Parent Association. (Annemarie, Glasmene Senior NS)

This description resonates with both Epstein’s (2010) view of decision making which is inclusive of families and Christenson and Sheridan’s (2001) concept of action where a collaborative approach is helps to achieve productive partnership. Annemarie’s statement suggests that a choice of different types of involvement may be of interest to parents and schools.

By referring to the mandates enshrined in various DE policies and circulars, such as the requirement for a Parents' Association, the principals have a clear awareness of their obligations to meet standards and follow guidelines. The response to policy (or not) is unique in each school and largely depends on who receives, interprets and enacts the given policy (Ball, 1993a). Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) felt there might be an incentive for schools 'to be seen to be involving parents' to comply with DE circulars:

I certainly think the Department pays lip-service to this. But I find the way it's communicated is, it's a task to be done, rather than the joy of a partnership like this, and what it can properly mean for schools. That's how circulars and documents are written, are more instructive. When I say instructive, I mean that in terms of telling you what to do, rather than working on building a partnership. (Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS))

Annemarie's use of the term 'lip-service' implies that schools may selectively report on types of involvement to the DE which are self-serving or not fully inclusive of student-parent voice (Horvat, Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Tett and Macleod, 2020). One principal mentioned the Student Parent Charter Bill (SPCB) (Department of Education, 2020), which may require schools to increase student and parent voice in decision-making processes, Orla (Penrose Way NS) said; 'there were rumblings about the Parental Charter at the same time, and I thought, Okay, let's kill two birds with one stone here. I feel if you can do the things smarter...' According to the DE, the SPCB will amend Section 9 of the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998). The amendment includes a requirement that schools develop a charter to promote the involvement of students and their parents in the education provided to students and also ensure its implementation (Department of Education, 2022). Orla is clear that this was a motivation for her school when becoming involved with the PSI.

4.3.3 School Self-Evaluation (SSE)

School self-evaluation is a collaborative, inclusive and reflective method of internal school review (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). Significant connections between the PSI programme and SSE appeared across the data. The principals in the study identified that the PSI framework provided a structured medium through which school improvement and self-evaluation could be conducted in a manner which is inclusive of stakeholder voices. Irish schools are driven by external regulation where policies are in place that encourage the inclusion of parents and students in SSE (Faddar *et al.*, 2021)

4.3.3.1 Action Team for Partnership (ATP) and the SSE process

The ATP aims to represent school, family and community in meaningful consultation and communication to plan for positive learning outcomes (Epstein, 2010, p. 33). In Martin's school (Ridgewood Senior NS), the work of the ATP became synonymous with SSE from the earliest days of school improvement and SSE in Ireland:

We'd look strategically at part of the areas that we wanted to hit, what we want to do, in what order, and what sequence. Then ask, what can the ATP support? That was one way of development. Equally the ATP might do their own work around what areas they think we'd like to look at, and come up with something completely different. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS)

Martin (Ridgewood SNS) also described how the ATP was involved in a review process of an Anti-Bullying Policy:

They (Action Team for Partnership) gave a huge amount of work on our anti-bullying code as well. The chair came up with the idea of the class developing their own contracts, and their anti-bullying codes and all of it. The children took ownership of that one particularly well. They chaired focus groups. Then they went into classrooms and shared the learning from it, developed a PowerPoint to share with their peers, and they presented by themselves. They brought that work on the ATP into the class, and brought the focus group information from the class to the ATP. Boy, were they on fire! (Martin, Ridgewood SNS)

Martin's experience of children's participation in the data gathering and development of policy indicates the potential of the partnership programme to meet a criteria of SSE, the inclusion of student voice in a meaningful way (Department of Education, 2022b). The enthusiasm of the statement was matched by other principals when describing student participation, suggesting that student voice might be more well received in the SSE process by comparison with the inclusion of parent voice (Faddar *et al.*, 2021).

The PSI framework (explained in Chapter 2) includes templates that prompt and assist schools in documenting the process of reflection on and planning for school improvement. The 'Jumping Hurdles' template prompts the Action Team for Partnership (ATP) to reflect on current parental involvement practices (See Appendix J). The One-Year Action Plan template is a tool for recording decision making and planning of school improvement projects of either an academic or behavioural nature (See Appendix K). The content of these templates responds to the Department of Education six step cycle for SSE at the point of creating and implementing an action plan and then monitoring progress (See Appendix N)

the actions identified, agreed and documented in the SSE steps so far are reflected in a practical way in the school, including in classrooms. There should be clarity

about responsibility for the implementation of the agreed actions, the timeframe for implementation, and how and when the impact of those actions will be monitored. (Department of Education, 2022b)

The efficiency of combining SSE with the ATP projects also appealed to Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS): ‘We dovetailed a lot with our school improvement plan in different subject areas and the participation of the ATP team, and that helped to move the school improvement plan along quicker, which is great.’ Fiona (Cremore NS) said that the school priorities for SSE guided the work of the ATP. Fiona noted that successful PSI projects influenced practice across the school:

Whatever was happening at the time in school self-evaluation would always influence our academic goals certainly, and even our behavioural goals, to the extent that whatever we were trying to achieve any given year in our development plan, or whatever, we always wanted to work with the ATP committee to support that. Indeed, the teachers found them very supportive, the parents did as well. I would say they hugely influenced practice on the ground in the school. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

In Macintosh Park NS the principal described how they methodically saw projects through by assessing the needs of the school and tailoring SSE focus and ATP targets accordingly:

There was often a rollover of a goal, that's something that wouldn't be finished. Then prioritising, which was usually one goal that would be more curricular linked and linked to the school self-evaluation. Then the other one would be out of a need. (Tracey, Macintosh Park NS)

Stephen (Coastview Special School) highlighted how PSI templates aided the planning and recording of SSE:

Evidence from the Partnership Schools Ireland will be perfect for you for the SSE and also the inspector...that's exactly what they want to see, isn't it? So, we're not just really engaging with our parents, but we actually we plan, we prepare and plan to do as well. I mean to execute projects together. (Stephen, Coastview Special School)

The appeal of the PSI templates as a means to record school improvement activity is clear, given that the DE specify that meaningful participation of pupils and parents in SSE requires that ‘need to see how their views were taken into account and how they influenced the agreed actions for improvement’ (Department of Education, 2022b). It would seem that the area for focus in SSE was determined among school staff outside the remit of the PSI, in advance of meetings, and then brought to the ATP for ideation and delivery of various projects. This finding places the work of the PSI not as a replacement for SSE, but as a complimentary endeavour which addresses two closely related points on the six step

SSE cycle which are to ‘put improvement plan into action’ and then ‘monitor actions and evaluate impact’ (ibid.)

4.3.4 Summary of Motivations for Involvement in a Partnership Programme

Principals were motivated to build family-school partnerships through the PSI programme by several factors including, school reputation, contextual needs, and to meet DES standards, including school self-evaluation. This range of motives gives good insight into the scope of responsibilities held by principals. As school leaders, the DES requires principals to oversee a range of processes to ensure quality education in Irish schools. Guidelines such as ‘Looking at our School’ and ‘SSE’ circulars state the standards for which schools are accountable. The principals identified that the PSI framework provided a structured medium through which school improvement and self-evaluation could be conducted in a manner which is inclusive of stakeholder voices. PSI templates aided the planning and recording of such work. Significant evidence of alignment of the PSI framework to SSE projects was found. These projects were undertaken by the ATP and then tailored to the contextual needs of each school site. This finding provides an Irish parallel for UK research which identified that schools adeptly implement new demands into existing good practice and recognise the value of collaborative, effective PI policies and strategies (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018, p. 118). The following section also outlines specific leadership practices which the principals associated with their role in the PSI programme.

4.4 Enactment of the partnership programme in individual schools

This theme analyses how the PSI programme was operationalised in each school. Firstly, the principals’ observations and experiences of communication at the ATP meetings are described with a view to illustrating how schools attempted to achieve equitable participation. Next, the principals’ insights on leading family, school and community partnerships are examined. Finally, examples of the projects which took place in each school context are detailed.

4.4.1 Facilitating ATP meetings

The Action Team for Partnership (ATP) meetings are a key element of the PSI programme (NNPS, 2020; *Partnership Schools Ireland / National Parents Council*, 2022). Parents, students, community representatives, and school staff participate in the ATP meetings.

When asked about the structure of the ATP meetings, some participants drew comparisons to the Parents' Association meetings. Differences between the ATP meetings and Parents' Association meetings included structure, format, agenda, participation level and focus. Principals felt the PSI programme offered an alternative forum for PI beyond established structures such as Parents' Associations or Boards of Management. They differentiated the parents on the ATP from Parents' Association members. The statement that 'There was nobody there for the ego. There was nobody there for the glory' (Orla, Penrose Way, NS) suggests that principals may perceive Parents' Association or Board of Management members as being agenda-driven. The principals viewed the structured nature of the framework as an enhancement which offered schools and parents a 'think tank' which is outside the remit of the DE Inspectorate.

Dialogue is more equally distributed when resources such as scripts, templates or worksheets are used to support group conversation in heterogenous groups (van Dijk, Eysink and de Jong, 2020). The templates and framework of the PSI marked one difference for participants when compared with the format of PA meetings:

The highlight for me, the difference between that and the Parents' Association was the structure was fantastic. I think the parents that were involved in it felt really good about this and felt they had achieved something very positive from the school and a sense of pride. Which I think is lacking well, was when I was principal in the Parents' Association because it just lacks that structure. (Louise, Aidentsfield ETNS)

Fiona (Cremore NS) described the structure of the ATP meetings in a positive light and identified that the 'goals' of the partnership were revisited each time:

We certainly always have agenda that we're going to follow and we would always visit our goals at every meeting to see where we were on the goals, what we'd achieved the previous meeting, where we were going and so on. There was a definite structure to them. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

Principals considered the tone of the meeting with particular attention to the students present. This involved creating a relaxed atmosphere that the children would enjoy, often involving refreshments and treats. It seemed that creating the right conditions was a

thought-out measure to form a positive mood and encourage the inclusion of different voices:

we started every meeting with, or we had it maybe afterwards, it was a cup of tea anyway and we always had croissants or scones, and the kids loved that [laughs]. They were thrilled, and the parents, there was a real sense of a 'nice kind of a morning'. I think everybody enjoyed that. The contributions, I thought it was very good we always made sure that we heard the various different voices. (Louise, Aidentsfield ETNS)

Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) did not sit in on all of the meetings but would check in briefly; 'I'd pop my head into them and to reaffirm them. Maybe to throw in a few goodies in at start of the meeting in, so there'd be nice things there'. Criteria for successful participation in partnership groups include pre-planning activities such as role-play so schools can break down existing hierarchical relationships and promote equitable parent engagement (Ishimaru *et al.*, 2018a, p. 52). This was noted in Penrose Way NS where ice-breaker activities were used to set team members at ease at the ATP meetings:

One of the staff agreed that she would lead the group. She came prepared and she would have little, initially she would've had little warm up exercises that we could all do together, which was lovely. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

Seating arrangements were thought out to encourage participation. In Glasmene Senior NS, Annemarie described that seating arrangements were modified to accommodate adult – child alternately in a circle configuration to include and encourage all voices. In Cremore NS, the ATP group sometimes split into small groups to foster dialogue; 'We might break up and do focus groups, get their opinions of different things. That worked quite well, everyone would take their turn to talk.' (Fiona, Cremore NS). Research shows that when a task is divided into smaller groups, this has a positive effect on participation and the overall functioning of the group (Wageman, 1995).

Orla (Penrose Way NS) stated how important the children's participation was to the adults on the ATP; 'We needed them to be involved. Whatever we did we had to be able to involve them.' She described how a teacher prepared differentiated meeting materials to enable the children to participate:

She would have a simplified version of whatever we were working on for the children that they could work away on, something maybe while the adults were having a separate conversation about the same topic and would come together at the end to compare notes' (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

One of the main principles of cooperation is that team members feel included and

encouraged to participate (van Dijk, Eysink and de Jong, 2020). In the next section, the principals describe their experiences of hearing parent and student voices represented at the ATP meetings.

4.4.1.1 Enabling student and parent voice

Schools are increasingly required to involve student and parent voices in developing policy and decision-making processes (Brown, McNamara, O'Brien, Skerritt, O'Hara, *et al.*, 2020). For Orla (Penrose Way NS), the purpose of ATP meetings was different to the PA meetings, and the children's presence marked another distinction:

Completely different I would say, in a very positive way. That's not to say anything about the Parents' Association meetings, because it's a different function and a different context. I don't think there's a negative or positive one against the other. The big difference is that the children are there. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

Fiona (Cremore NS) identified that the ATP offered a balanced, collaborative forum which was more representative of all in the school community than the Parents' Association:

It's also good from the point of view of collaboration. If you look at that, in many ways, your committee is almost like a microcosm of the school community, because you've got community reps, and you've got parents, and you can have ancillary staff on it. It's many of the pupils. You're hearing everyone's voice in the meeting. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

Principals valued parents' perspectives and valued their contribution to decision-making.

Orla said:

One of the parents in the group, and it was the mum who didn't speak English as her first language she said "sometimes I find it very hard to understand some of the language. I understand it in my own language, but I'd love if there was a picture or something that could help me." We came up with the idea of a Shape and Space dictionary. (Orla, Penrose Way NS).

Following a suggestion from a parent representative on the ATP in Penrose Way NS, an alternative method of communication using visual aids was designed. Beyond helping parents to become more engaged in their children's learning, the perspective helped the school to overcome a language barrier to PI. It is an example of the PSI model's potential to open dialogue that appreciates alternative understandings of parental involvement. Such actions may reduce cultural, racial and language barriers in schools (Parsons *et al.*, 2018).

Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) valued pupil voice at the ATP Meetings pointing out the additional benefit to children from participating in meetings with adults, which she

described as ‘a great experience’ from which they learned a lot. Face to face interactions between children and trusted adults marks the highest level of developmental potential for children in a setting such as a school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The inclusion of children and attentiveness to their participation at ATP meeting is therefore a positive aspect of the PSI model. When speaking about participation, Louise said that by clearly allocating defined roles to ATP members that the process was enhanced, which she linked back to the structure of the PSI framework:

we always made sure that we heard the various different voices and, you know, people contributed, and we tried to assign roles then to different people, and, you know, actions to different people and things like that. And, yeah, I thought it was very well run. I thought it was very structured. And I think the structure is there to enhance that. (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS)

Stephen (Coastview Special School) acknowledged that the adults should be prepared to take on more work in order to maximise student contributions and actualise the students’ ideas as a priority:

How I would see that happening is that probably giving plenty of time to the young person's voice in the meetings where they attend, mining that data as much as we can, and knowing full well that we're probably going to have a number of conversations afterwards via text or email or on the phone, where we're going to have to try and get those things over the line that they wanted. It'd be a lot more work by the adults, while the young people have contributions. While we've got them in the room or we've got everyone there, it would be great to hear their voice a lot more. (Stephen, Coastview Special School)

Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) was enthused by the children’s presence at the ATP meetings but questioned the limited reach of the prescribed structure. She felt that the programme could be improved if a greater number of students could share the learning experience; ‘how do you incorporate other children or a greater number of children having those wonderful opportunities in school?’ (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS). Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) also expressed that it would be better if more children could experience the ATP. The principals could see the value of increased representation of students’ voices through their participation in the PSI. A key indicator of student wellbeing is that ‘systems are in place so that the voice of the child, teacher and parent are heard and lead to improvements in school culture and ethos’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2019c, p. 38).

4.4.2 Reflections on Leading the PSI programme

Each principal was asked to reflect on the leadership skills they found most relevant to leading the partnership programme. For the PSI to be effective, it requires good leadership from the principal. Their responses covered a range of skills, including personal awareness of positionality and building leadership capacity. This section explores how school leaders enact partnership practices and what those practices are (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020).

4.4.2.1 Principals' positionality at meetings

A common thread in the principals' descriptions of the meetings was blending in quietly or absenting themselves to allow others to take a lead. In this way, the principals sought to avoid becoming the default leader on the ATP. This awareness of positionality came up for three principals as a potential barrier to communication and participation in the meetings. Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) outlined her strategy of occasionally withdrawing from the ATP meetings to ensure that not only the children but all ATP team members were less intimidated:

My presence at those meetings meant that most people deferred to me when discussing and as a result, I chose to step out of meetings or not attend some for that very reason. And I would have let the teachers know that that this wasn't a lack of support, it was the fact that I didn't want it to be seen as my project or the school project. It's a group project. And by doing that, then people stepped up more. Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS)

Stepping back to enable others to step up denotes Annemarie's (Glasmene Senior NS) intention to create a shared approach to dialogue and decision-making. Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) noted that both himself and the Deputy Principal in his school held a similar view about their input on the ATP:

I felt, and my deputy felt, that if the two of us were on it at the same time, it would always be deferring to the two of us... in schools where trust is high, things go on without having to always defer, there's that word again, to the principal. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS)

Martin continued by describing the ATP process as 'one of those where my leadership is about my absence, and we mentioned that earlier on, that by stepping back and allowing other people to lead' (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS). Orla (Penrose Way NS) also stepped back from the lead role on the ATP and identified that she enjoyed this aspect of the

meetings; 'I wasn't managing the meetings, I attended them'. Orla candidly admitted the challenge of allowing others to lead:

I suppose I found it a bit difficult in the beginning and I had to teach myself to keep my trap shut and not to be interrupting. That was one (project) and what the children brought to the whole process was fantastic. They were just so enthused and so interested and so willing. It was just fantastic, really good. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

Orla's perspective demonstrates a value for the children's contributions. The data suggests that principal self-awareness is an important factor in the successful facilitation of ATP meetings in schools.

4.4.2.2 Building Leadership Capacity

Principals are best placed to support school reform which includes optimising the promotion and deployment of staff resources to build leadership capacity (Khalifa, Gooden and Davis, 2016). No school is greater than the sum of its parts, and the principals in the study identified numerous ways leadership was distributed across the work of the ATP. In Glasmene SNS, the chair of the ATP meeting would rotate among members so that parent involvement was extended to a leadership role on the ATP. As such, the development of leadership capacity among parent members of the ATP was unique to Glasmene Senior NS. Three principals perceived the PSI programme as a means to distribute leadership and build leadership capacity of school staff in a similar way to the probation process for newly qualified teachers called Droichead (Droichead - Teaching Council, 2018). Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) likened the PSI programme to the Droichead process, calling it a 'flat structure', where leadership is distributed across a range of staff and not 'all about the principal'. Distributed leadership leads to greater organisational capacity; however, this requires strategic coordination and intentional planning if increased leadership capacity is to materialise in practice (Leithwood, Mascal and Strauss, 2009). Building leadership capacity is a key element identified in LAOS 2016 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016):

He/she empowers teachers to take on leadership roles and to lead learning, through the effective use of distributed leadership models. The principal encourages teamwork in all aspects of school life. He/she creates and motivates staff teams and working groups to lead developments in key areas, thus building leadership capacity. (Department of Education and Skills, 2016)

Building leadership capacity through the partnership programme was evident in three of the seven schools, where deputy principal or other member of the teaching staff led the projects (Stephen, Coastview Special School; Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS; Tracey, Macintosh Park NS). Collegial leadership involves communicating vision and encouraging teachers to lead; it is positively associated with school-family engagement (Smith *et al.*, 2021). Fiona (Cremore NS) described the leadership requirements of the PSI programme mostly in terms of oversight and practical skills to manage all of the elements:

You definitely need to call on all your people skills, you know, your interpersonal skills and your diplomacy for all of that. And organisational skills too, I suppose you have to be organised, you know, and there are so many different committees and things going on in the school and you are so busy. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

Tracey (Macintosh Park NS) stated that the key leadership skill required for partnership was the ability to allow others to take the lead, to be on the team but not ‘the driver’, more so to take a ‘back seat’. This view echoes other statements from participants relating to the positionality of the principal on the ATP. The principals’ role can therefore be described as supportive, but also one of monitoring and oversight in the partnership process (Molina, 2013). Both Orla (Penrose Way NS) and Fiona (Cremore NS) associated leadership of the partnership process and the need for ‘openness’ and ‘positive perspective’ towards parents. Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) shared this outlook and reflected that the concepts of ‘welcoming and inclusion and valuing the voice of all’ were vital when leading a family-school partnership.

4.4.3 Activities/Projects of the Partnership School Ireland Programme

School communities operationalised the partnership programme in a range of ways in their schools. Academic projects included procedural maths videos for parents, shape and space dictionaries, Irish language projects and resources, parent tip sheets for literacy, and social, environmental and science education projects. These projects sought to support parents to engage with their children’s learning in new and practical ways. Welcome projects included physical improvement to indoor and outdoor spaces, an intergenerational project and a citizenship project. The principals did not recount a definitive list of all that had happened but recalled, perhaps, more recent, or memorable projects. A list of projects was collated in a table which demonstrates how schools employed the ATP as a resource for

supporting school improvement and school self-evaluation across the curriculum (See Appendix M).

4.4.3.1 Literacy and Numeracy Projects

Three out of the seven schools focused on numeracy projects. Specifically, numeracy projects were likely to include procedural videos for parents, shape and space dictionaries, and resources to support parents with children's mathematics homework. Relationships with peers, teachers, and family contexts are known to shape how students engage with mathematics (Ishimaru, Barajas-López and Bang, 2015). In Penrose Way NS, the ATP delivered a numeracy project to help parents to support their children's learning at home. Orla (Penrose Way NS) described a project designed to overcome the language barrier that was published and then became part of the school induction or welcome pack received by all new entrants:

We looked at the language of shape and space from Junior Infants to Sixth Class and put together this booklet, and then we gave it to the ATP, and they went through it with a fine-tooth comb and edited it. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

Louise said the ATP in Aidensfield ETNS compiled online procedural videos for parents and students to watch at home to convey the school's method for teaching mathematics. Students can build strong maths-linked identities, which expand learning opportunities in environments where their families have been consulted (Ishimaru, Barajas-López and Bang, 2015). This project not only supported numeracy in the school but also served to support families in a more holistic way by reducing anxiety around homework:

The maths goal that we had linked to our SSE and linked to parental involvement. In talking to the parents and talking to the children at the (ATP) meeting, they felt that sometimes they went home from school, even though maybe the maths had been explained, but they couldn't remember how to do it, or that mom and dad were showing them a different way to do multiplication or to do division or to do subtraction and that that was causing rows at home. (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS)

The school extended this awareness to the development of its homework policy. Principals in Ireland are mandated people and have a legal responsibility for child protection and children's welfare (Nohilly, 2019), as is expressed here:

Sometimes I think homework, it can be a very challenging thing in a home, and it can lead to a lot of unhappiness for the parents and the children, sometimes in relation to child protection issues. I would come across a lot of child protection issues which when boiled down, came down to sometimes homework. I felt very strongly that no, I didn't want that to be the case. We put in caveats in our homework policy about if you're finding it hard 'please stop'. Just send a note or just sign the

homework diary that it couldn't be done or whatever rather than getting upset about it. (Louise, Aidsensfield ETNS)

Pianta and Walsh (2013, p. 24) describe 'low-risk circumstances' which prevail when children's experiences across settings such as home and school are "consonant or congruent or conversant" with one another. Conversely, high-risk circumstances derive from a dissonance between the 'systems' of home and school causing emotional conflict for children (ibid.). In the example above, Louise demonstrates awareness of the effects of unstable links between home and school. She builds child safety into the work of the ATP which serves to create a protective factor for children through development of school policy away from potentially harmful situations for children.

Within the accounts of numeracy projects, there is a pattern of dual benefits which seemed to spill over into other areas of school life with positive effect. The maths videos designed to assist with homework positively impacted parental involvement, resulting in a review of the homework policy. The Shape and Space dictionary became part of an induction pack. Numeracy projects in Fiona's school (Cremore NS) were designed to support parents with practical assistance or 'tips' on how to help children with tables and the language of problem-solving in Maths to help parents to support learning at home. Common to the partnership activities, described above, is support for parents to engage with their children's learning in the home context. Parental engagement was therefore an outcome of the partnership projects. In schools, the projects also resulted in consistency of practice through the school, i.e. from teacher to teacher.

4.4.3.2 Welcome Projects

The PSI programme encourages participating schools to set goals in three main areas: Academic, Behaviour and Welcome goals. The climate of partnership (welcome projects) were integrated with curricular school improvement targets, including an intergenerational project described by Fiona (Cremore NS). Schools had completed projects to making environmental changes, both indoor and outdoor, as well as intergenerational and citizenship projects.

An outdoor project in Tracey's (Macintosh Park NS) school exemplified the ability of the ATP to drive projects led by team members from the community and student categories 'Our school wildlife garden was done in collaboration with the ATP and that completely

evolved, but it's fabulous. I think everybody was just so excited by it' (Tracey, Macintosh Park NS). A buzz was created around the project by running a school-wide competition to name the space:

I feel like it's been our little thing that we're all hanging onto this year because we needed something to look forward to, a good news story, and we had a competition through the ATP to name it and the class also pitched an entry and then the committee, the children and the adults chose the name together. (Tracey, Macintosh Park NS)

This project came about during the Covid19 pandemic and signals how the ATP project supported morale in the school during challenging times. Tracey (Macintosh Park NS) also noted that school staff might become somewhat institutionalised and 'not notice that our working environment may require improvement after some time' (Tracey, Macintosh Park NS). Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) shared that it was parents on the ATP who flagged the need to introduce clear signage on the campus as an improvement measure. In Ridgewood Senior NS, the children on the ATP proposed a project to improve playground markings, and the community representative was the driving force behind improving the physical appearance of the school entrance. For Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS), the physical appearance of the school 'fades' for teachers over the years, and a 'critical eye' is very helpful:

You need people asking those questions, because we always do what we always did. It's probably a hard after a time to see the school from somebody else's perspective. The people who will tell you that, are the children, and the community people from the outside. Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS)

Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS) may be correct in this view, as all participants in the study specifically accredited the parent, student and community ATP members for the successful completion of improvement projects to the physical school environment.

In common with the literacy and numeracy projects which were described, welcome projects were integrated with curricular school improvement targets, including an intergenerational project described by Fiona (Cremore NS):

Our goal was to promote ourselves in the community and a partnership goal. That intergenerational project, that I've spoken about before, that we did with the local senior citizens club, that was a huge success and that was totally down to the ATP committee. (Fiona, Cremore)

The positive interplay between the school and local community is exemplified in Fiona's account:

That particular one was very ATP-driven in that they came up with that idea, saw it through from conception right up to fruition. It was great for involving all the classes in the school. All classes took it in turns over two years to get involved with that, to go out to the senior citizens club, entertain them in different ways. For example, the sixth class brought them out or shared their World War II projects with them, another heard their stories and some of them had memorabilia from World War II (Fiona, Cremore NS)

BEHAVIOUR

An ATP project that brought about change in Penrose Way NS, was a positive behaviour award based on school ethos and the children's learning about human rights and citizenship. The project was linked to strands of the SPHE curriculum for the fourth and fifth classes. The project was led by a community representative rather than school staff. This project led to the children's involvement and the development of their critical thinking skills and an awareness of human rights:

We came up with this idea of rewarding the positive behaviour. That brought in 'how will we go about this?' One of the team, one of the community members did a lot of work with our fourth and fifth classes around children's rights and their responsibilities, because we were really clear that along with the right goes a responsibility. They came up with their rights and responsibilities as citizens of our school. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

As with other ATP projects, this practice is now embedded in school culture as the behaviour award is still made each week and is an example of a change to school practice due to the partnership process.

4.4.4 Summary of enactment of the partnership programme in individual schools

This section illustrated how the PSI programme was enacted in each participant's school. Firstly, the facilitation of ATP meetings was discussed to illuminate how equitable participation was achieved among students, parents, community members and school staff. The principals described how they often 'stepped back' from the leadership role at ATP meetings to encourage student and parent voices. When discussing the key leadership practices relating to partnership, the principals identified building leadership capacity across the school community. This work involved tasks requiring organisation, monitoring and communication. Leadership for partnership was underpinned by a mindset of openness, understanding, care and positivity. The energy required to maintain leadership at this level is unquantifiable and often takes a personal toll on school leaders (Stynes, 2014, p. 184).

Finally, the ATP projects undertaken in each site were described. It is clear that collaborative work took place, a shared understanding of partnership was fostered on the ATP teams, and improved learner outcomes were central in each example given. These elements are critical to the construction of caring school communities (Louis, Murphy and Smylie, 2016, p. 317). Successful outcomes from projects frame the PSI programme as a positive framework for schools. In the next section, these benefits are balanced with a discussion regarding the challenges of the partnership programme which arose for participating schools.

4.5 Challenges of involvement in the partnership programme

Challenges to the implementation of the PSI included: recruitment and turnover of ATP members, maintaining momentum among team members, managing workload, using PSI templates and adhering to the prescribed meeting format.

4.5.1 Recruitment and Turnover of ATP members

Within the PSI framework, selecting members of the Action Team for Partnership (ATP) is the principal's responsibility. Participants identified no major challenges in finding students, parents or staff who were willing to join the team. The recruitment of representatives from the local community was identified as a challenge in a number of schools 'It was hard to get people from the local community' (Louise, Aidentsfield ETNS). As the framework is based on Epstein's Family, School and Community Partnership model, it is essential that all teams have representatives from the locality who have no other direct affiliation with the school. Examples of community members on the team included librarians, youth group leaders, business leaders and a local councillor. Both Orla (Penrose Way NS) and Martin (Ridgewood NS) expressed a similar difficulty:

Then the hardest part for me was finding two people in the community who would be willing to get involved. It's not that there weren't people willing, but I suppose I just wanted people who genuinely would have had an interest in school, and who would have had an interest in working with us. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

From Orla's point of view identifying community members with an interest in education was challenging. For Martin, practical issues in the locality, such as the lack of industry, created a problem:

It's the first primary school building in the area. It's harder to get people from a wider spread side of the community who aren't parents, or who you don't know,

because we don't have industries, we don't have factories... the community piece is a challenge for new communities. Extending your reach beyond parents or past parents, that's the bit we find challenging, and that could be the circumstances that we're in here as a new community. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS)

Finding and retaining local people to serve as community representatives on the ATP may require consideration by the National Parents' Council in the Irish inception of Epstein's (2001) framework for involvement. Securing a member of staff to manage the programme was vital to four participants. The success or failure of the team was linked to the coordinating teacher, who is not compensated financially by any paid allowance for the additional work. Fiona (Cremore NS) was aware that the teachers on the ATP occupy a dual role which needs her support:

back in their environment as teachers, and you're trying to manage, you know, maybe what they have to do on the committee as their job on the committee, vis a vis all that they are juggling in school as well. Fiona, Cremore NS

Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) remarked, 'Unless you have somebody who's really good at pulling it together, it doesn't get pulled together.' Orla (Penrose Way NS) was complimentary of a staff member who had provided significant support for the programme. Tracey (Macintosh Park NS) commented that 'you definitely need somebody driving it like either in school or be at the chair, if she (teacher lead) walked away it could fall apart unless somebody else took it on'. Much goodwill is required to successfully recruit staff members who will lead the ATP. Like most reform programmes, strong collegial support is a pre-requisite for successful partnership (Sanders, Sheldon and Epstein, 2005)

4.5.1.1 Sustaining momentum of the ATP

In some schools, keeping the momentum going was a challenging factor. PSI has been running in Orla's school for more than seven years and slowing the pace of the projects was a strategy to sustain the initiative:

When something is new, you dive in head-on as well. You learn to take your foot off the pedal after a while, and you can't keep up that pace all the time. So, I think we probably we've slowed down. And that's no harm. (Orla, Penrose Way NS)

Fiona (Cremore NS) expressed that as well-established staff stepped away from the process, sustaining momentum would become difficult:

I do think when you're in it, as long as us from the very beginning ...it's very hard to sustain it. Now, for instance, this year, one of our teachers who's on it is retiring and two of our parents are parents of children in sixth class. We're going to be losing them. One of our community reps is quite elderly and I think she's going to be relieved, but we really have to look at practically a whole new committee now next. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

Retaining staff, students, parents and community members on the ATP was problematic for three schools. In Glasmene Senior NS, the principal noted that as a senior national school, there was only a four-year cycle of pupils, so the longevity of children and parents on teams was limited. As a limitation, Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) felt that the ATP was only becoming established when the team was disrupted and new members were required. This was echoed by Orla (Penrose Way NS) 'one of the challenges for us, that kind of transition from one team to another team'. Fiona (Cremore NS) also found the turnover of team members challenging. She thought there might be a requirement for her school to 'start from scratch and get us all trained up again. I'm even aware that there are some new members of staff who have come on board since the pandemic who would not be very 'au fait' with what the ATP is at all' (Fiona, Cremore NS).

Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) found two ways to sustain momentum. Careful planning and multiple training sessions from the NPC over the years helped the team to avoid overload:

In order to get things done, we would, we would focus on one area, get it over the line, and then move on to the next area, rather than doing a whole heap of things and getting nothing done... (NPC member name) did a couple of different trainings with us, you know, the various years that we were doing it. Yeah, training, I thought that was very good and that helped. (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS)

The key factors leading to the turnover of the ATP members were shortened four-year school cycles in junior and senior school models as well as parents and staff members moving on. Momentum was a challenge found to be overcome by realistic target setting and continued training support from the NPC.

4.5.2 Managing Workload

Five principals identified that the PSI programme involved a significant workload for teachers. Projects required a strong commitment on the part of the teaching staff involved. The pacing of projects was a feature to be managed carefully, and monitoring projects was a task to be either delegated or undertaken by the principals. Tracey (Macintosh Park NS)

stated that pacing the projects required management ‘the first couple of years they were going to do the world and *more*. They just realised it wasn't going to be possible, way too ambitious and we had to scale it back’ (Tracey, Macintosh Park NS). This insight from Tracey (Macintosh Park NS) resonated across the interviews where the issue of overload in schools was apparent. Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS) recalled that the ATP members recognised the need to ‘pull back ambitions’ and that the project would be at risk if the pacing was not managed.

Other participants also seemed keen that the programme would not be perceived as extra work and contribute to overload fatigue. Tracey (Macintosh Park NS) remembered weighing up the risks when making decisions on ATP projects: ‘we had to say “stop, we have to stop taking everything up.” There's too many programmes!’ (Tracey, Macintosh Park NS). Annemarie recognised that the success or failure of the PSI depended on ensuring there was capacity in the school to take on something new ‘We were very clear not to overload the school either because you're conscious of the time of another new programme coming in for the school staff as well’ (Annemarie, Glasmene Senior NS).

Fiona (Cremore NS) felt that the partnership projects should never be a ‘burden on the staff as something extra that they were going to have to do.’ In the following description, Fiona works to strike a balance between the need to pace projects while taking care not to discourage the enthusiasm of the team:

I felt I wanted to keep it very grounded and keep it pulled back to stuff that was doable. Now, without crushing their ideas, because I have to say all the ideas came from the committee. They were really ideas-driven, very, very ideas-focused. The parents had some fantastic ideas. All of the committee did. I was the one just coming with the goal. They were the ones coming up with all of the ideas. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

Programme overload can negatively impact teacher wellbeing and contribute to poor decision-making regarding determining school priorities (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005; INTO *et al.*, 2015). The principals balanced the energy and enthusiasm of all those involved in the partnership projects with a realistic view of their scope and the capability and wellbeing of the team.

4.5.3 Monitoring the progress of the partnership programme

Monitoring the progress of partnership programmes can be critical to their success (Sanders, 2014; Epstein and Sheldon, 2019). Although in some schools, the evaluation and monitoring were undertaken by other team members - a teacher in Macintosh Park NS and the Community Representative in Glasmene NS - most principals did this work themselves. It is more beneficial when a dedicated resource is specifically assigned to monitor the progress of partnership programme (Molina, 2013). Although participants seemed happy to do the work of evaluation of partnership projects, it is perhaps not ideal when the role is already a demanding one, as pointed out by Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS); 'the exponential increase in our workload has meant for everyone, you don't have the time to engage as much as we would in real partnership with our parents'. This shows that not only was a resource needed to carry out the work of monitoring but that a high level of skill, collegiality and interest was also important:

I think that in fairness it's down to very skilled facilitation of the deputy principal and the amount of things that she put into it. I think it has to be very, very well led for it to work well in a school. That comes from the school leadership team. (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS)

Practice differed in Aidensfield ETNS, where Louise, the principal, described how the task of monitoring ATP projects was shared among the team:

It was a smaller group that that monitored you know, we'd have broken that down to the HSCL, one of the parents, and one of the pupils involved in that. Now, unfortunately, there wasn't an outside community person involved in that, because it was just too difficult to get them to give the time to us. (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS)

Although principals discussed monitoring progress, it should be noted that the scope of the research study did not include specific learner outcomes in the form of pre- and post-intervention assessment results from the partnership projects.

4.5.4 Operating PSI programme during the Covid19 pandemic

Six out of the seven principals said their school stopped holding ATP meetings during the pandemic. The inability to bring the cross-section of stakeholders together and the pressure of operating within a crisis were cited as reasons for this. One school attempted to hold a virtual ATP meeting which was not deemed a success:

The Zoom call didn't work because it's about being on the school campus and looking at what we can do to support the school while we're on campus. I know the group are very keen to do something even small this term to contribute to after all

that everybody has gone through. It will, there something will occur on a smaller scale this term. Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS)

The same school did restart the programme at the first opportunity following the second lockdown (April 2021) 'It has worked so well. It's ongoing and even in the pandemic, we had a meeting outdoors there recently. It's just the enthusiasm for those involved.' Annemarie (Glasmene Senior NS)

Overall, participants' accounts of the operation of the Irish PSI programme were consistent with the NNPS Annual Report (Epstein, 2022). The American report identified three areas that require attention from the pandemic: students' learning losses, progress, and persistent problems with the digital divide (Epstein, 2022). These areas are reflected in the participants' observations that there was a loss of connection, inequities in the education system were highlighted, and certain 'silver linings' did emerge during the Covid19 crisis.

There were some homes where the children regressed and things were terrible for them. In other homes, I think it brought parents and children closer. Parents did for the first time maybe really sit down and see what are they learning other than the bit of homework just at night or whatever. From that point of view, I think parents are more involved. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

Most principals agreed that the lockdowns had caused parents to value the work of teachers and schools more than before, and Annemarie noted that unexpected bonds were created with families who generally had not been involved with school:

There has been almost a stronger connection made online by parents and I think possibly reaching more parents and because of lockdown there'd been many phone calls that have been required to be made by myself or the staff and the bonds that have been made with maybe with parents who never really engaged with the school before. There's a connection there now, which I think is fabulous. That's a big positive from it. (Annemarie, Glasmene Senior NS)

4.5.5 Summary of Challenges of the PSI programme

Challenges of the PSI programme related to recruitment and retention of members of the Action Team for partnership over a sustained period of time. Connected to the turnover of the team members was sustaining momentum and the need for ongoing refresher training for new members, which the NPC provides. The extra workload was associated with the PSI programme, which was undertaken in most sites by a teacher as lead, the coordinator or the principals themselves. The workload is related to the preparation of materials and monitoring of the projects. The recent pandemic has led most schools to pause the operation

of the PSI programme, although one school has continued to meet online using Zoom and outdoors.

4.6 Changed Perceptions

This study aimed to discover whether their participation in the PSI programme had affected how the principals viewed the concept of parental involvement. With this in mind, the same question was posed at the end of each interview ‘Do you think your view of parent involvement has changed since you became involved in PSI?’ (Researcher).

This section accounts for the principals’ responses to the final question asked to establish if any personal or professional transformation could be noted. The principals’ responses are categorised into two subthemes: partnership as action and partnership as an alternative path for parental involvement.

4.6.1 Partnership as Action

Stephen (Coastview Special School) repeated that the PSI model was good for getting projects accomplished; ‘It’s that the Partnership Schools Ireland is more of a project-based thing.’ Stephen felt that the success of PSI was closely linked to pre-existing good parental involvement in a school:

I don’t think you can have parents as partners without having reasonably good parental involvement I would say. I would expect that to be because surely if you didn’t have great parent involvement, you’d probably want to get that fixed as a target. How could we promote parental involvement first before we went looking at delivering projects in partnership with parents? (Stephen, Coastview Special School)

Louise (Aidensfield ETNS) provided a twofold response to the question of whether her changed perception had changed ‘I do, partnership in itself is great for ‘getting things done’. It’s very important part of inclusion in the school and getting things over the line.’ (Louise, Aidensfield ETNS). Firstly, this response recognises the practical application of the PSI model as a means to complete school improvement projects. Secondly, the partnership is connected to the concept of inclusion which was central to Louise’s mission when setting up a new school in a very diverse community.

4.6.2 Partnership as an Alternative form of PI

Well-established forms of PI include help with homework, volunteering, attendance at school meetings and encouragement with extra-curricular activities and are often associated with middle-class maternal parenting (Crozier and Reay, 2005; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

Fiona (Cremore NS) identified the PSI as a way to encourage more parents to become involved and available to support the school. Looking back at her experience of the PSI, Fiona had managed to widen the net of parents available and created scope for parent voice in decision-making rather than just relying on the Parents Association:

I think, yes, but it's definitely been positive. We always get parents who are not on the Parents Association. You want parents that are not already involved in the school to be involved. For preparing a focus group and that, whereas always you were trying to go to your Parents Association, now you have another group of parents that you can call on for a focus group or to get their opinion on something. It just gives you that little bit of balance there. (Fiona, Cremore NS)

It is possible that the PSI model offers an alternative to the current Parents' Association model that exists in Ireland. Orla (Penrose Way NS) echoed this view when she said that the PSI process had given her 'a different means and a different method and a different way' of involving parents in their children's education. Annemarie (Glasmene, Senior NS) stated the PSI programme had changed her perception of the potential of PI 'it has made me think about what it *can* be'. She framed the comment in the context of praising the particular parents who had joined the ATP in her school:

We might assume those who put themselves forward for a Parent Association might be the best, because they want... (trails off) - but these two people had a huge, huge contribution to make. And I think this was their preferred avenue to support the school. (Annemarie, Glasmene Senior NS)

Annemarie describes how her assumptions were challenged and revised by her experience of the PSI process. There is a suggestion that alternative options could tap the potential for parents who wish to be involved in schools beyond the traditional Parents' Association membership route. The PSI programme may add value to schools seeking to increase or modify their levels of parental involvement. In Macintosh Park NS, Tracey said that perhaps parent engagement in the PSI model was more highly valued in the school:

I suppose you then value the contribution more and see that parents can bring a lot to the organisation. It's not about you doing them the favour of allowing them into your organisation. It's them actually bringing something in. (Tracey Macintosh Park NS)

Tracey's reflection demonstrates that her appreciation and value for the support of parents increased through the PSI process, suggesting a change in her frame of reference or understanding of PI. The idea of the principal 'allowing' parents in to school as 'mere tourists' (Torre and Murphy, 2014, p. 4) moves to an asset based view that parents can and do add value to school life. It could be argued that this changed the principals' perspective

and actions relating to PI, in which power relations may be somewhat levelled by increasing the space for parent voice in school decisions.

When asked if the PSI had changed his view of PI, Martin said; ‘No. It's confirmed what I would've already believed. To me, there was no big sell. No, it's (partnership) very important to me’ (Martin, Ridgewood Senior NS). Martin qualified the statement by saying he had never had any difficulty in seeking parents’ help with opinions, decisions and school projects in the first place. Throughout the interview, Martin held a positive disposition towards all forms of PI and expressed a desire to build trust and community; hence no ‘deep shift’ in his perception of PI could be observed (Cranton, 2006, p. 5).

4.6.3 Summary of Changed Perceptions

Principals’ views of PI changed in some cases because of participation in the PSI programme. The concept of partnership was portrayed a structured enactment of PI which focussed on the goals of the ATP in each school, which were achieved through planned activity and collaborative projects. Partnership was also identified as an avenue to promote the inclusion of parents in diverse school settings in line with recommendations found in recent Irish research (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). Six of the seven principals reported that their experience with the PSI programme had caused a shift in their prior beliefs regarding PI. This is significant given the influential role of principals who are ‘best placed to support the change in beliefs and ethos within their school which will be required to truly move to a partnership model of support for learning’ (Goodall, 2018b, p. 144). The changes noted were an increased value for parents’ ability to contribute to school life, new ways to include parent and student voices in decision-making, an alternative option to Parents’ Association membership and the possibility of greater balance in parent representation.

4.7 Conclusion

The first theme illustrated the principals’ views on PI. Benefits included the holistic development of the child, the integral nature of PI in schools and PI as a supportive mechanism for parents. Barriers to PI included communication problems, lack of time and teacher resistance. Parents were framed as a physical, financial, and skilled resources capable of supporting the work of schools. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory and Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence, the significance of the relationship between home and schools through interactions or ‘proximal processes’ was

foregrounded. By seeking to make meaning of the principals' dispositions towards the concept of PI, the researcher located the corresponding factors that may have led them to become involved in a structured framework for partnership. To secure and sustain PI, the principals described a cycle of building and maintaining very good relationships across their school communities.

The motivations for principals to become involved in the PSI programme were addressed next. The 'need' for schools to engage parents in this manner was found to have numerous sources, including the principal's personal beliefs and attitudes, requirements from the DES and the context of the school. In particular, schools were shown to utilise the PSI programme as a vehicle to support and document school improvement and self-evaluation planning. The individuality of schools was brought to light as principals discussed particular dilemmas within their school communities, which they sought to address by taking a partnership approach. Some issues that principals sought to resolve were an inclusive approach to diversity and the enhancement of the reputation of the school within local communities.

Enactment of the PSI programme was the focus of the third theme. Firstly, the dynamics of the ATP meetings were described in detail with a view to understanding how equal representation of all stakeholders was managed. Next, the principals talked about their leadership experiences within the PSI programme. This demonstrated the participants as having an oversight role and building leadership capacity while being approachable and inclusive in their work. Finally, examples of ATP projects which had taken place in each school were shown.

The fourth theme provided an opportunity to review the challenges encountered by the participants while operating the PSI programme. Principals discussed challenging aspects within the recruitment and turnover of members of the partnership team. A clear view of the additional workload attached to the project was given, particularly regarding resourcing and monitoring of partnership projects. Goodwill and volunteerism may not be sufficient to maintain the momentum of such programmes. The challenge of the Covid19 pandemic had impacted the operation of the PSI programme in schools by preventing meetings from taking place.

The final theme enabled participants to describe how their experiences with the PSI programme altered their view of PI. This question yielded two separate insights into family-school partnerships. Firstly, the partnership was framed as an activity-based approach to parent involvement and helpful towards delivering specific school improvement projects. Secondly, principals noted that PSI broadened their views of the potential of parental involvement and offered an alternative to other types of PI, such as membership of the Parents' Association. A table was collated to briefly indicate the key similarities and differences relating to how the initiative was implemented in each setting (Appendix O). In the next chapter, the findings outlined here will be further discussed in light of the theoretical framework for the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This research study sought to explore primary school principals' perceptions and practices of parental involvement and partnership with particular reference to their experience of the Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI) initiative. The research questions explored principals' perceptions of PI; their motivations to be involved with PSI; the enactment of PSI in schools; the benefits and challenges experienced within the partnership programme; the contribution of the PSI to parental involvement and how school-wide processes or policies changed as a result of the work of the partnership team. Based on the interview data, the findings of the study provided a detailed insight into the principals' experiences which were outlined in the previous chapter. The theoretical framework and key concepts of the literature review in Chapter Two study shape the discussion in this chapter. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory approach applied to PI and a partnership initiative emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to PI, one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of various systems in supporting children's education. The findings are considered here using an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) under the headings outlined in Table 4. To allow for consistent application of the theory, at each point in the eco-system, the discussion is categorised in terms of impact at three separate levels; firstly, teacher, classroom and school level; next, school leadership and management; and finally, at the level of school community.

Table 4: Discussion points relating to theoretical framework and key concepts

Ecological System Level	Issues identified in Literature Review	How PSI addressed issues affecting PI	Key learning relating to values and limitations PSI and PI
Microsystem: Immediate factors influencing PI	Family school and community barriers to PI including: Language and literacy Parental time Leadership style School climate	<i>Teacher, classroom and school level:</i> Multilingual resources Shape and Space dictionary <i>Leadership and Management:</i> Principal visibility Growing leadership capacity in the school <i>School/Community:</i> Policy and practice	Leadership of the partnership programme
Mesosystem: Connections between microsystems and their influence on PI	Theories of capital; social, cultural, economic Teacher attitudes and resistance Diversity; race, gender, social class	<i>Teacher, classroom and school level:</i> Physical Environment Atmosphere of Welcome (open door) <i>Leadership and Management:</i> Psychological Environment (trust) <i>School/Community:</i> PSI supporting diversity	Benefits of a partnership programme Motivations for participating in a partnership programme
Exosystem: External factors and structures affecting PI	Policies, legislation and circulars NPC	<i>Teacher, classroom and school level:</i> Curriculum for Caring PSI Academic Projects <i>Leadership and Management:</i> Incorporating aspects of PSI into School Self Evaluation process <i>School Community:</i> Intergenerational and Citizenship projects	Motivations for participating in a partnership programme Benefits of a partnership programme
Macrosystem: Broader social, political and cultural context	PI as normative with recognised benefits to child, school and community	<i>Teacher, classroom and school level:</i> Beliefs and understandings of PI and partnership <i>Leadership and Management:</i> Discourse of leadership and overload <i>School Community:</i> Context of each school Context of Irish Education System	Principals perceptions of PI
Chronosystem: changes over time	History of PI Parents on the ‘outside’ changed to central and recognised in child education e.g. Boards of Management, Parents’ Association	<i>Teacher, classroom and school level:</i> Experiences during Covid 19 school closures <i>Leadership and Management:</i> Parents as partners <i>School/Community:</i> Changing views on parenting. Evidence of change across all three areas	Challenges experienced with the partnership programme

5.2 Bronfenbrenner's microsystem level and findings from this study

Microsystem is the term Bronfenbrenner (1979) assigned to the immediate environments or settings experienced by a child. For the purposes of this study, and in general, the primary settings for children are home, school and local community. These three settings are the spheres of influence which form the basis for Epstein's typology for partnership (Epstein, 2010). The literature review identified significant facilitators and barriers to PI at family and community level and school level relating to leadership style and school climate.

Teacher, classroom and school level

The principals in the study were aware that many children in their schools have culturally diverse home settings (Fiona, Martin, Louise, Orla). Congruent with the literature there was evidence of linguistic barriers to parental involvement which minority families often encounter (Robinson & Harris, 2014). The PSI projects were noted to support parents with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds by installing multilingual signage on campus (Aidensfield ETNS) and creating resources to enable parental engagement with learning (see for example, Shape and Space dictionary p. 79). Frequent communication via notes home and school apps, plus the principals' availability to parents via phone or in person, was the main method of sharing information with parents reported by the principals in the study. By addressing language barriers schools may prevent parents from becoming alienated from the school community (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Principals were not specifically asked about school websites or the use of translated texts to cater to language needs (Gilleece and Eivers, 2018) and no principal alluded to these modes of communication. This study acknowledges the complexity of linguistic barriers to PI and does not overstate the impact of the PSI programme in this regard. The study points to potential areas of development in this regard including greater use of translated texts to overcome linguistic barriers to PI and partnership.

Leadership and Management:

The PSI provided opportunities for school leadership to greatly enhance parental involvement. Notable success included growing leadership capacity among teachers, parents, students and community members on the ATP. Members of school staff and in particular teachers and deputy principals, took on significant leadership roles (Coastview

Special School, Macintosh Park). Parents held the position of chairperson on the ATP (Glasmene SNS), community members led projects (Penrose Way NS) and students gathered data and were involved in developing school policy (Ridgewood SNS). Ecological transitions occur when a position or role is altered and this was observed as the principals seemed to adapt their leadership roles to enhance the partnership environment demonstrating an 'extended, differentiated, and valid conception of the ecological environment' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27). At a micro-system level, the PSI can be viewed as an initiative that offered schools a more expansive notion of distributed leadership evidenced in the various enactments in participating schools. For Gronn (2010, p. 407) such 'capability building is the most useful antidote or corrective to heroic individualism'.

The concept of stepping back to allow others to step up to leadership was consistent across the interviews and, in each school. To achieve equal input from all stakeholders, consideration was given to seating arrangements, refreshments, icebreaker activities and a relaxed atmosphere to set the tone at ATP meetings. This consideration was paired with strategies to elicit participation including differentiated meeting materials, rotation of the chairperson at meetings and the use of varied formats including focus groups and brainstorming. The structured nature of the ATP meetings seemed to ensure productive sessions which enabled goal setting and decision-making processes to take place. In addition to developing leadership capacity across members of the ATP, the principals in the study demonstrated organisational leadership skills and this was identified as a requisite for the management of the PSI programme in schools. Effective principals earn respect and trust from staff and parents by working persistently to build both relational and organisational trust (Day, Sammons and Gorgen, 2020).

The additional workload from the operation of the PSI programme was acknowledged by all principals but the perceived benefits of the ATP projects seemed to outweigh the extra tasks which included training, time at meetings and monitoring of projects. In addition to extra workload, the pacing and momentum for the programme required management. From initial ambitions to deliver substantial projects, the principals described reigning in ideas to form achievable targets while taking care not to thwart the enthusiasm of the team (Tracey, Annemarie, Louise, Fiona). This aspect of school management is difficult to quantify and

requires sensitivity towards and knowledge of the unique context of certain types of school (Khalifa, 2012; Sisson, Shin and Whittington, 2021).

In order to manage the partnership programme, the recruitment of members for the ATP is the task of the principal. Four principals in the study sought parent members who were more representative of the schools' diverse populations and parents who were not involved in the existing Parents' Association (Louise, Fiona, Orla, Annemarie). By 'selecting' and not 'electing' parents to participate on school committees and teams such as the ATP, principals are enabled to choose members based on 'desirable skills, professional expertise or new political interests with different agendas' who are not necessarily focused on student or community outcomes (Blackmore *et al.*, 2023, p. 549). There was no indication of selection processes of this nature in the study, however in one school the principal identified that the community representative on the ATP as the 'business partner' who had significant skills to support the monitoring of projects; 'it was clear, there was a strong competency there in leading groups as well' (Annemarie, Glasmene SNS). The autonomy of principals to 'craft' members of democratic structures in schools, such as an ATP, choosing whose voice is heard and who benefits from local decision-making has dual significance. Principals are empowered to create transformational partnerships by creating democratic dialogue with particular focus on the context of the local school community (Quiñones and FitzGerald, 2018). Schools in lower socio-economic areas may have reduced access to skilled voluntary resources (Blackmore *et al.*, 2023). Goodall (2021) asserts that further research on the topic of parental engagement could examine the short- and long-term outcomes of the work of initiatives to assess whether the phenomenon serves to reinforce social inequality by ignoring the significance of class within parental engagement initiatives.

School Community:

School policies can foster the inclusion of families in school life (Van Voorhis, 2004) or create a distance between the spheres of home and school (Taysum and Arar, 2018). Multiple school policies had been developed as a result of the PSI programme in collaboration with parents, community members and school staff. These included homework, anti-bullying, parents as partners and initiatives which contributed to codes of

behaviour (Aidensfield ETNS, Ridgewood SNS, Coastview Special School, Penrose Way NS).

There are significant gains to be made when the number of school policies which are supportive of PI increases (Marschall and Shah, 2020). Parental input in the design of school policy matters, because schools and families can sometimes have differing views on what effective PI involves (Nakagawa, 2000; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009). In four schools the principals indicated that Parents' Associations had developed an over-emphasis on fundraising as the primary means of involvement in their schools. Principals who are dissatisfied with traditional practices, such as PTA fundraisers or DE mandated Parents' Associations, may resolve to create alternative channels for family engagement at their schools (Auerbach, 2009). Concerns regarding fundraising may not be justified as the literature on PI indicates that parents are often affirmed when schools who rely on them for fundraising benefit financially (Flessa, 2008).

5.3 Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem level and findings from this study

The meso-system level of Bronfenbrenner's theory provides the connection between the structures of the child's microsystems such as the connection between the home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This layer in ecological systems theory was applied to the findings to examine the social relationships and cultural pathways (Vélez-Agosto *et al.*, 2017) that exist between home and school and affect PI and partnership. At a meso level it was clear that by fostering good levels of parental involvement, the principals engaged in practices to pave the way for a partnership approach. At school level, teachers were supported in developing skills to confidently engage with parents. In terms of leadership, the all principals 'talked the talk' (Auerbach, 2009) of creating positive school climate which was validated by accounts of physically bright, welcoming spaces, portrayed by murals, gardens and clear signage. Finally, school communities seemed to have the greatest intersection with PI and partnership at a mesosystem level which was typified by the principals' in-depth knowledge and understanding of their respective school communities. There was intention and purpose linked to participation in the partnership programme as a means to be more inclusive of parents in an ethnically diverse school community and a special education context. In this finding, the principals demonstrate understanding that strong relationships or 'linkages' and consistencies between home and school, are experiences in

the meso-system which help children to apply learning in the various settings they encounter (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Teacher, classroom and school level:

Teachers' resistance to PI may stem from a deficit view of parents or a view that parents may pose a threat to their professional judgement (Carvalho, 2000). Although there are increased calls for parent and student contributions to school decision-making processes in Ireland, not all teachers necessarily believe in the benefits of increased parental involvement in school life (Brown, McNamara, O'Brien, *et al.*, 2020). The principals in the study understood that teachers may retain an 'us and them' (Orla) mindset, have 'suspicion' (Martin), be fearful of 'being judged' (Tracey) or dislike the 'unpredictability' (Annemarie) of working with parents. In all accounts, the principals described engaging 'boundary work' as a way of overcoming teachers' resistance to parental involvement in school life (Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 498). This work requires strong communication skills and emotional management to achieve mutual understanding and respect in school communities (*ibid*).

Sometimes resistance is based on teachers' past experiences with parents (Povey *et al.*, 2016). Negative interactions' frequently impact home-school relations and may lead to suspicion among teachers (Lau and Ng, 2019; Brown, McNamara, O'Brien, Skerritt, O'Hara, *et al.*, 2020). To lessen teacher fear and encourage positive regard for parental involvement, two principals outlined the 'bridging and buffering' behaviours they engaged in to facilitate good parent/teacher relations (Valli, Stefanski and Jacobson, 2018). 'Bridging' is the term Valli *et al* (2018) use to describe how principals build consensus and mutual understanding across school communities through partnership programmes. 'Buffering' refers to how some principals guard against poor parent-teacher relationships, particularly where 'powerful parents raise concern and dissatisfaction among teachers' (Addi-Raccah and Grinshtain, 2022, p. 1146), and also where early career teachers lack the experience to handle difficult interaction.

The data showed multiple examples of principals choosing to 'work hard' to promote PI. It seems that 'school like families and family like schools' (Epstein, 2001) do not materialise automatically. Martin (Ridgewood SNS) described 'buffering' activity as explicitly modelling positive interactions with parents to encourage teachers' confidence.

Tracey (Macintosh Park NS) noted that teachers felt reassured once they benefitted from the support of parents as an extra resource in the classroom. Building teachers' confidence is a helpful strategy towards increasing levels of PI, as teachers who are self-assured in their professional work 'are less concerned about parental involvement, and are capable of managing their relations with parents and interacting with them' (Addi-Racah and Grinshtain, 2022, p. 1146).

Leadership and Management:

At a mesosystem level, ecological systems theory was applied to identify that the establishment of caring relationships and school environments supported the development of PI and partnership. Positive school climate is associated with improved academic and social-emotional development (Berkowitz et al., 2021) and influences parental involvement and partnership (Marshall, 2004). For Bronfenbrenner (1979) the physical environment of a setting, such as a school, enhances children's potential to be both motivated and enabled to participate in activities and engage with learning. In three schools, principals (Martin, Stephen and Tracey) highlighted how the physical environment particularly the entrance and reception areas had become a warm and more inviting environment for everyone due to collaboration with the ATP. Other examples of PSI projects included an outdoor classroom (Macintosh Park NS) and a wildlife gardens (Cremore NS, Macintosh Park NS) which offered an additional teaching and learning space as well as a relaxation and social space. The provision of a welcoming and accepting atmosphere for parents denotes positive school climate and is linked to substantially reduced barriers to learning in schools (Alinsunurin, 2020, p. 19). School climate is related to trust and the leadership traits of being forthcoming, welcoming, and honest served the principals in the study well (Stynes, 2014, p. 183). By building trust at every opportunity, leaders can be responsive to the context in which they find themselves (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020).

The principal's influence on levels of parental involvement and positive school climate is well established (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009, p. 38; Jeynes, 2011). As well as enhancing the school environment through the PSI projects, the principals' consistently described an approachable leadership style which is positively linked PI (Quiñones and FitzGerald, 2018). Approachability was consciously employed by maintaining a presence at the school gate (Orla, Martin), having an open-door policy at the school reception desk or availability by telephone (Fiona, Annemarie, Stephen). Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) found that such

‘visibility’ of the principal was directly linked to parents’ expectations of inclusivity, opinions of themselves as ‘valued clients’ and as a gauge of the principal’s attitude to parental involvement. In a special education setting, particular focus on restorative relations between home and school was a priority to ensure positive dynamics between home and school in line with research (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015a). High frequency terms from the data included active listening and effective communication strategies known to impact school climate, develop trust, mutual respect, and knowledge of shared purposes (McNaughton *et al.*, 2008; Berkowitz *et al.*, 2021). Modelling language and practice of this nature encourages teachers to involve families (Khalifa, 2012). The findings suggest that ‘overlapping spheres’ (Epstein, 2001) between families and schools are the result of concerted efforts to encourage positive rapport which in turn can become the foundation for developing partnership programmes.

All schools described the physical environment of the school, either internal or external, improving as a result of PSI projects. Principals who create welcome inviting spaces for parents, and train staff to also do so, improve school climate and respond to the needs of families while attending to improved learner outcomes (Quiñones and FitzGerald, 2018). In addition to the language of positive school climate, authentic leadership was borne out in the intentional development of relationships described in the next section.

School Community:

The importance of a two-way relationship between home and school was referenced by all principals in the study. The findings provided evidence of principals establishing sound communication pathways to build and foster relationships by promoting to promote mutual understanding. The principals viewed the PSI as a way of cultivating shared vision across the school community. In two schools, the principals were clear on the advantages of PI and saw the PSI as a means to extend those benefits (Cremore NS, Glasmene SNS). In Aidensfield ETNS motivation for involvement with the partnership programme reflected an attempt to balance the benefits of participation between home and school in an ethnically diverse community. In Coastview Special School, the principal sought to support parents and he did this by building a stronger relationship than had previously existed. The mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979) comprises this reciprocal aspect of the home school relationship. Reciprocity of this nature is a ‘process which is both causal and influential on the interactions between the partners, creating a new common regard’ and for true partnership to exist both mutuality and reciprocity must be present (Rouse and O’Brien,

2017, p. 47) to be present for a true partnership to exist. The PSI initiative was a strategy used to bring unity and understanding to school communities and is indicative of an authentic leadership approach to partnership (Tett and Macleod, 2020).

In six out of seven interviews the principal spoke about parents being 'on board'. There is a connotation of consensus, and the term is generally positively associated with getting people 'onside'. However critics suggest that harnessing support to promote the values of the school can occur at the expense of home or family values, commonly reinforcing dominant or middle-class ideals (Crozier, 1998; Horvat, Weininger and Lareau, 2016). Parents who are more involved in school management structures and activities have opportunities to develop links with teachers, schools and other parents, enhancing their children's social capital levels (Auerbach, 2007). Principals in the study were aware of this 'win-win' (Fiona Cremore NS) aspect of parent involvement in school structures. This view was highlighted by observations that children whose parents were involved were 'clued in' to school, had better attendance and behaviour (Fiona, Cremore NS), and benefitted socially from seeing their parents physically in the school (Annemarie, Glasmene, NS). Membership on committees, such as Parents' Associations, is linked to concentrated involvement in children's education, which increases parents' social capital (Karsidi *et al.*, 2014).

In Aidentsfield ETNS, the principal saw the ATP as a means to include previously marginalised parents in school life, while Orla (Penrose Way NS) was aware of parents' previous negative experiences of school and saw the ATP as 'a meaningful way' to increase PI. Critically self-aware school leaders use their understanding to create new environments for families who may otherwise be marginalised because of race or class (Khalifa, Gooden and Davis, 2016) while some school leaders display a lack of understanding of racial and cultural politics causing parents to feel powerless and vulnerable (Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014). In the absence of data which reflects the perception of the parents who became involved with the partnership programme, it is hard to assess if membership on the ATP led to 'true partnerships', where the school staff went beyond their role as information providers and 'where neither sets of understanding are privileged' (Rouse and O'Brien, 2017, p. 51). This can be seen as a limitation of the study.

Diversity in education is a broad term relating to how race, ethnicity, gender and other factors impact how students from minority groups experience schooling (Timmerman *et*

al., 2016). Schools in Ireland have become more diverse in the last twenty years (Coolahan *et al.*, 2017) and have embraced many different cultures with increases in ethnic minority pupils attending schools (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). The welcome goals element of the PSI seemed to develop a sense of community and support inclusion of ethnic minorities in schools in Ireland. Political and demographic changes over time have a ripple effect on school life. In areas of high mobility parents with limited knowledge of the education system can have difficulties communicating with each other about positive school experiences (Darmody and McCoy, 2011) which may lead to distrust if their worldview is reinforced by social encounters outside the school (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Schools who make a conscious effort to inform families about how schools and the education system function often foster good communication through culturally sensitive parental involvement programmes (Darmody and McCoy, 2011). There was evidence of principals taking an inclusive approach in diverse communities in order to create ‘a new story’ which differed from the pre-existing perceptions of PI in each school (Taylor, 2017, p. 22). Through the work of the ATP meetings effective home school links (Epstein, 2001) were created to work towards building trust (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001) and stability. Examples included multi-lingual signage on campus, multi-lingual learning resources for use at home, YouTube videos explaining mathematics procedures and school induction booklets for new Junior Infants. Although the projects certainly supported parental engagement with learning in the home (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014b), the one-directional nature of information from school to home can be noted which seems at odds with the ‘two-way’ reciprocity of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory.

Issues relating to special educational needs and disability can impact the interaction between home and school (O’Toole *et al.*, 2019) and the importance of PI in terms of successful placement of students in special education contexts was described by Stephen (Coastview Special School). Stephen promoted PI, by engaging in frequent, friendly communication with families, planning school activities, addressing family needs, and following through with expectations (Francis and Gross, 2016). An awareness that parenting is not an “individual business” but “a social one” is an important aspect of the relationship between schools and parents of children with special needs (Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015, p. 117). In terms of Epstein’s Six Types of involvement, the special school and the multicultural school principals were the only two participants to allude to the parenting element of partnership. School leaders with a clear mission to establish collaboration with

parents and a culture of inclusion in communities to enhance student and stakeholder outcomes (Francis and Gross, 2016). Whether seeking to promote inclusion, to establish a multicultural school community or promote the school's positive reputation within the community it was clear that principals were motivated to build partnership to meet a contextual need.

5.4 Bronfenbrenner's exo-system level and findings from this study

Bronfenbrenner's exo-system level signals the links between microsystems, which directly affect the child (Vélez-Agosto *et al.*, 2017). The findings of this study highlighted the impact of PSI projects at school level which can be viewed as tangible links between school, home and community. At leadership and management level, the existence of national policy relating to school self-evaluation and the inclusion of stakeholders in collaborative decision-making processes is discussed. At community level, further ATP projects served to activate 'exo-system' links across generations in local communities, the benefits of which are enriching for children and increase self-confidence (Bronfenbrenner, 2009).

Teacher, classroom and school level:

Bronfenbrenner defined the exo-system, the 'third circle of the ecological model' as a setting in which the developing child is not situated, does not actively participate but, however, may possibly experience its' influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exo-system is significant to the concept of PI and partnership because of the role of social policy in shaping children's educational experiences. Rosa and Tudge, (2013, p. 247) contend that Bronfenbrenner (1979) associated education programmes and 'policy decisions about the type of care and education that children receive' in schools and child-care settings with the exo-system level. The collaboration of the DE, IPPN and NPC to promote the PSI programme is not an enactment of policy but can be viewed as significant national education initiative (O'Toole *et al.*, 2019).

At school level, children's most direct experiences related to their participation on the ATP or their involvement with any of the school activities and projects facilitated by the ATP (listed Appendix M). From a parental engagement perspective some PSI academic projects supported learning in the home and school environment by providing parents with resources, co-designed by parents, to engage with their children's learning and were described in detail in Chapter Four. The role of schools in supporting parents to engage with and foster their children's learning in the home is significant (Goodall and

Montgomery, 2014b). By creating ‘tip sheets’ for parents relating to times tables and oral language development, procedural videos for mathematics in the home, comprehension guides for literacy and multi-lingual ‘dictionaries’ for numeracy concepts, the participating schools were contributing to parents’ ability to support learning in the home (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014b). Accounts of parental engagement practices of this nature marked a turning point in the dataset where the principals’ language progressed from general views of parental involvement towards specific examples of enactments of partnership.

Leadership and Management:

The exo-system layer was noted to intersect with the PSI at leadership and management level when the principals spoke about their motivation to become involved and the benefits they experienced with the partnership programme. Firstly, a link between the PSI programme and school self-evaluation, in particular the inclusion of parents and students within SSE was identified. Accepting change and ‘that the concept of ‘stakeholders’ is not just the latest fad but rather that parents and students are in fact partners who have a right to full involvement and may bring a lot to the table if invited’ (Brown, McNamara, Cinkir, *et al.*, 2020, p. 171) had a bearing when the principals discussed compliance with DE requirements and School Self Evaluation. Norms in Irish schools indicate that although parents and students might be consulted in the SSE process, they are not considered key decision-makers in the process (O’Brien *et al.*, 2022).

The DE requires evidence of school self-evaluation, such as annual SSE Reports and Checklists (Department of Education and Skills, 2016b) (see Appendix L). Stephen’s (Coastview Special School) statement that the PSI programme enabled schools to ‘plan’, ‘prepare’ and ‘plan to do’ school improvement can be interpreted in the context of the resource templates provided by the National Parents Council for use by the ATP. This type of accountability and recording matches the language and requirements of school self-evaluation guidelines from the DES. Schools’ ability to present evidence or ‘usable data’ is a known challenge of the current models of inspection in Ireland (McNamara and O’Hara, 2012, p. 93). The One Year Action Plan (Appendix K) guides schools by identifying areas of focus, tracking progress and assigning responsibility, and can therefore be viewed as a resource to support the SSE process. By listing priorities and including a ‘who, what, where and when’ task-based table, schools can track the fulfilment of each project. The PSI templates may motivate principals who wish to involve students and

parents in the SSE process to adopt the programme. There is also a sense that Stephen (Coastview Special School) is motivated to provide school inspectors with ‘what they want to see’. This may refer to the DE model of inspections and is perhaps evidence of a culture of performativity. Ball (2003) represents performativity as a mode of state regulation where people are responsive to targets, evaluations and other performance indicators. It is exemplified in the way schools strive to meet policy requirements which call on schools to measure and be accountable for progress and to provide proof of these endeavours (Perryman *et al.*, 2018). Principals are held in a ‘circuitous set of power relations’ (Niesche and Gowlett, 2015); the leader, on the one hand, but always subject to other tricky sets of power relations from a variety of stakeholders, including the DE Inspectorate.

The examples provided by the principals demonstrated schools interpreting policy by utilising the PSI as a means to deliver SSE goals and targets. The principals were motivated to be involved with PSI due to its contribution to the schools’ ability to deploy the ATP to organise, deliver and record SSE activity gathering data using prescribed templates. Theoretical frameworks and instruments which are evidence based and systematically tested support school self-evaluation by using data to identify the improvement priorities of schools (Antoniou, Myburgh-Louw and Gronn, 2016, p. 205). On one hand, this finding may encourage other principals to become involved in the PSI programme to enable both parents and students taking an active role in SSE processes. On the other hand, studies have found that negative associations can exist between PI and legislation which demands it, suggesting that that teachers and principals may face tensions when mandated to involve parents (Alinsunurin, 2020).

School Community:

The PSI projects initiated links between the school and the wider local community creating learning experiences for children based on connections with settings beyond their primary home and school environments congruent with the exo-system layer of Bronfenbrenner’s theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). All schools reported completing projects based on Welcome Goals, there is flexibility within this goal type, and the projects covered environmental changes, both indoor and outdoor, as well as intergenerational and citizenship projects. The intergenerational project in Cremore NS exemplified collaboration with community through coordination with other groups (Epstein, 2001) while achieving the goal of promoting the school within the locality for the benefit of young and older people alike. Cultivating intergenerational community relations to connect

older and young people is as much an equitable outcome as the promotion of parental involvement itself (Ishimaru *et al.*, 2018b, p. 55). Success was celebrated with a presentation ceremony, reinforcing the intergenerational bond. Bronfenbrenner (2009, p. 215) argues that the benefits of supportive links between settings such as schools and senior citizen clubs are maximal in children and older people as these interactions enhance experience and self-confidence. Shared intergenerational vision creates a sense of local community in which schools can become a critical hub for community development (Green, 2015, p. 15).

In Penrose Way NS the citizenship project was led by a community representative rather than school staff. Family and community involvement in education policy is problematised by Carvalho (2000, pg. 19), who states that ‘it overlooks the professional status of teachers, ignoring their knowledge and preparation’. Other scholars laud, as beneficial, changes to practice which may re-orientate power relations in support of a more equitable outlook of education (Tett and McLeod 2018, TL Green, 2017). The children’s active involvement in a project to learn about social responsibility promotes a ‘*curriculum for caring*’ which enables them to ‘not learn *about* caring, but to engage *in* it’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 53). The project resulted in a system for supporting positive behaviour in the school which is fully embedded in ongoing practice. Transformative family-school engagement processes occur when practice moves beyond isolated ‘projects’ and are embedded into school culture (Goodall, 2018 p. 234) as is exemplified in two of the projects.

5.5 Bronfenbrenner’s macrosystem level and findings from this study

The macrosystem level of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory is comprised of cultural values, customs, beliefs and laws that shape human development (Berk, 2000). The application of this theory level to parental involvement in schooling, similar to O’Toole *et al.* (2019), I use the macrosystem to refer to the societal values, beliefs and norms relating to parental involvement to ‘the wider pattern of ideology and organisation of social institutions common to a particular social class or culture to which a person belongs, such as patterns of racism, cultural norms (O’Toole, 2017, p. 16). Parental involvement is generally understood as normative, and of benefit to children, parents, teachers and the wider school community (Desforges *et al.*, 2003; Jeynes, 2010). This section documents principals’ beliefs and values about parental involvement, and how these were evidenced

in their actions and practices during the PSI. Principals' beliefs are reported under benefits to schools, benefits to children; and benefits in relation to specific school contexts.

Teacher, classroom and school level:

The positive dispositions of the principals towards the concept of PI align with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory which asserts that child development is influenced by the beliefs and societal attitudes transmitted in home and school settings. This layer of connection is known as the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The principals spoke of PI in general terms as being developmentally good for children and integral to school life. From the perspective of ecological systems theory the connections create a protective factor for children 'various segments of the child's life – family, school, peer group, neighbourhood' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 231). Congruent with Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 2010, p. 32) the principals were in favour of building strong links across family, school and community as a strategy to improve children's outcomes in education and beyond.

Just three of the seven principals mentioned homework as a type of PI. School-based PI, mostly with reference to participation in representative structures such as the Parents' Association and the ATP partnership team, was strongly identified by principals as a benefit of PI. The principals did not refer to other types of involvement in child's education at home, such as educational play, trips, activities, story-telling and game playing (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Goodliff *et al.*, 2017; Ippolito, 2018). This indicates a school-centric understanding of the term 'parental involvement'. This finding confirms the 'separateness' of the terminology of PI and partnership in the participating schools as noted in Chapter Two. It suggests that the principals were more likely to associate home-based PI with partnership activities such as parent tip sheets, videos to support learning and booklets etc.

Leadership and Management:

Partnerships are often associated with improving efficiency within organisations (Brinkerhoff, 2002) and the principals in the study clearly understood the benefits of active co-operation between home and school (Jeynes, 2018). Martin (Ridgewood SNS) indicated the 'exponential' increase in principals' workload. This was reiterated by Orla (Penrose Way NS) who expressed the need for principals to work 'smarter not harder' in the face of increasing work demands. The motivation for partnership as a means to 'dovetail'

(Annemarie, Glasmene SNS) policy such as SSE with PI, may stem from the popularity of distributed and transformational leadership models, which despite contemporary discourse of school leadership, remain ‘very much constructed in the vein of power being possessed by the principal and working in a very top-down fashion’ (Gronn, 2010). A prevailing hierarchical structure can be observed in leadership standards frameworks including LAOS 2022 (Department of Education, 2022a) and even distributed leadership models, which may result in a sustained individualist approach to school leadership (Niesche and Gowlett, 2015). Recent research established that principals, although increasingly autonomous, experience negative effects on their health and wellbeing due to growing demands for reform and compliance which reduce their ability deliver instructional leadership (Niesche *et al.*, 2021). Hence, at a macro-system level, it is possible that partnership programmes may serve to support principals to deliver leadership as the demands of the role build.

School Community:

Contexts are ‘structures and cultures within which one works’ and Fullan (2006, p. 116) in common with Epstein (2010) and Bronfenbrenner (2009) identifies that for educators, three levels of context exist: school/community, district, and system. Fullan challenges school leaders to ask the question ‘can we identify strategies that will indeed change in a desirable direction the contexts that affect us?’ (Fullan, 2006, p. 116). Contextual drivers for involvement in the PSI specific to each school, such cultural diversity, (Aidensfield ETNS, Cremore NS), school reputation (Penrose Way NS, Macintosh Park NS) and special education (Coastview NS) became apparent in the interview process. Schools are microcosms of both society and the local communities they serve (Haupt, 2009). The principals identified various challenges specific to their own setting which they sought to overcome. While not a total solution, participation in the PSI was described as a measure to address some issues. Managing the reputation of the school and maintaining relationships between stakeholders in the local community falls largely to principals (Barr and Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 496).

The principals were asked directly whether the concept of PI was ‘valued’ in Ireland. The question was posed to provide space for the participants to reflect on the concept of PI. One principal felt that things were changing gradually from a traditional ‘keep the parents at the gate’ mentality (Fiona, Cremore NS) and Orla (Penrose Way NS) felt the Irish attitude

to PI ‘had a bit of a way to go’ but also noted that school patronage may be a factor. As both Cremore NS and Penrose Way NS are Catholic schools, it is possible that ‘traditional’ and ‘Catholic’ are being used interchangeably in the case of both Fiona and Orla’s comments. While no empirical Irish research has compared parental involvement across school patronage types (Conboy, 2023), the Schedule⁷ for Catholic schools (CPSMA, 2022) omits any reference to PI. By contrast, the two multid denominational patron bodies, Educate Together and Education Training Boards Ireland, according to their ethos statements⁸, seek to actively and democratically include parents in school life (McCormack, O’Flaherty and Liddy, 2020). This response solidifies the term PI firmly as a school-based phenomenon related more closely to participation in democratic structures than children’s learning outcomes from the perspective of the principals in the study.

5.6 Bronfenbrenner’s chronosystem level and findings from this study

The chronosystem level of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems refers to changes over time as they effect child or adult development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). In Ireland, due the development of education policy over the past fifty years, the status of parent involvement in children’s learning has been elevated from a peripheral role to one of partnership (Department of Education and Skills, 1991; Government of Ireland, 1998). From this perspective the dimension of time and how it relates to school environments can be appreciated.

Teacher, classroom and school level

Characteristically, chronosystem events alter existing relationships and create a dynamic which instigates change (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). This study took place during the global Covid 19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 marking just such an experience for educators and students alike. According to Tracey (Macintosh Park NS) a toll was taken on children’s wellbeing and her interactions with parents during this time comprised countless telephone

⁷ The legal definition of the ethos of the Irish Catholic primary school is set down in a document known as the “Schedule”. The Schedule is given as an appendix to the Deed of Variation, which is an agreement between the Minister for Education and the patron bodies regarding the management of schools (Mahon, 2017, p. 40)

⁸ Multi-denominational school schools in Ireland set out specific ethos statements with emphasis on egalitarian values on their respective websites (ETNS, 2017; ETBI, 2019)

calls during the lockdown period to address concerns not of an academic but a social nature whereby children were missing their friends and school community.

The principals' reported that their involvement with parents during this phase was notably based on telephone and email contact which was occurring at an unprecedented level (Fiona, Orla, Annemarie, Stephen, Martin, Tracey). Harris (2020) observed school leaders to be 'working tirelessly to ensure that for the learners in their care, emotional, social and mental well-being is nurtured and supported' during the period and so pausing operation of the partnership can be viewed as an expression of their response to leadership challenges at the chronosystem level at that point in time. The partnership programme ceased to operate as a result in six out of the seven schools in the study. Glasmene Senior NS, restarted the programme as soon as outdoor meetings were permitted and the principal noted that the enthusiasm of the ATP for the initiative had been a factor making that happen.

Leadership and Management

The significance of parental involvement in education in Ireland has evolved over the past number of decades. as was noted in Chapter One. From an ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) perspective, the evolution of PI can be viewed through the lens of the chronosystem. The principals in the study were aware of law and various policy in relating to PI and partnership including: The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), Parents as Partners (Department of Education and Skills, 1991), Looking at our School 2022 (Department of Education, 2022a) and guidance on School Self Evaluation (Department of Education, 2022b). Legislation and national policy have shaped the relationship between schools and families at each turning point, and hence have had a bearing on the leadership and management of schools and is likely to continue in this vein in light of the impending Student Parent Charter Bill (Oireachtas, 2021). Bronfenbrenner's (1986) chronosystem is applied in this case as a theoretical lens to gauge whether the principals' experience of and interaction with the PSI programme had caused a change in their views of parental involvement over time.

Six of the seven principals agreed that their perception of PI had changed following their schools' participation with the PSI programme. Overall, the structured nature of the framework seemed to have the effect of 'getting things done', in schools which separated it somewhat from previous experiences of democratic structures in their schools such as

the Parents' Association. The principals' extensive reports of the enactment of the PSI in each school demonstrated activity which exemplified five out of six of Epstein's Six Types of Involvement; communicating, volunteering, support for learning at home, decision making and collaborating with communities. Among the partnership activities described there was no element of engagement with parenting skills. When reflecting on the process, the participants revealed altered perceptions of PI. Firstly, participation in PSI had increased the principals' value for parents' ability to contribute to school life. New methods and means to include parents' voices in decision-making were identified. It was suggested that the ATP provided an alternate avenue for parents who did not choose to join a Parents' Association and made greater balance in parent representation possible.

School Community

Socio-historic factors such as these indicate that legacies affect schools as part of the 'chronosystem' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In Penrose Way NS, the principal's experience and motivation to become an agent of change was consistent with evidence from a previous Irish study. Parents' negative past experiences of their education in her school had a lasting impact across generations in her school community. Galvin *et al.'s* (2009, p. 64) study notes that past legacies impede 'full actualisation of educational partnership' in Ireland due to assumptions based on past institutional religious culture which once prevailed. In other jurisdictions, similar damaging legacies require resolution and renewal, as has been the case regarding the education of Aboriginal children in Australia (Burrige and Chodkiewicz, 2012; Woodrow *et al.*, 2016). Establishing an identity for a new school community is a task for principals and can be achieved by building collaborative cultures in school communities 'where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it' (Fullan, 2006, p. 116).

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented a discussion of the research findings regarding contemporary Irish school leaders' perceptions of PI and experiences of the PSI programme viewed through an ecological systems theory lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the microsystem level of the theory, principals acknowledged that linguistic barriers can prevent families from being involved with schooling, some of which were alleviated through PSI projects. It was also at this level where the leadership style of the principal was identified as influential on school climate. The PSI programme was found to grow leadership capacity across all stakeholders in school communities while also by involving them in school policy

development. At the mesosystem level, the relationships between schools and families came into focus. The principals were positive and inclusive in their attitude towards PI and partnership. This was manifested in their language, accounts of building teacher confidence to work with parents and descriptions of approachable and culturally sensitive leadership practices. The motivations to participate in the PSI partnership were noted to involve parents in school structures, particularly in diverse school communities.

In this study, exo-system level factors demonstrated the effect of national policy on schools. Children's learning experiences were positively affected by PSI projects and school leaders utilised the initiative to meet school self-evaluation and parent involvement requirements of the DE. The beliefs, values and cultural context of the principals' perceptions, motivations and experience was examined at macrosystem level contextualising the findings within educational discourse and current aspects of the education system in Ireland. Finally, the changing nature of the phenomenon over time, was examined through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem level, clarifying some of the challenges experienced with school closures during the Covid 19 pandemic and the increasing status of parental involvement in schooling over time. In the next and final chapter, this discussion is refined to propose recommendations arising from the study and concluding thoughts.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This research explored primary principals' perceptions of parental involvement and their experiences of the Partnership Schools Ireland programme, a structured framework for family school community partnership. A qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with school principals was employed to address the research question and gain insights into how the programme was operationalised in Irish primary schools. While complying with mandated aspects of parent involvement such as Parents' Association and Boards of Management, the participants sought to maximise both parent and student engagement in practical ways to reach school improvement targets which were agreed at a local level. The principals presented examples of utilising the PSI framework to meet DE requirements and in many cases achieved this through the inclusion of student and parent voice. The challenges experienced included: recruitment of community members to the Action Team for Partnership; increased workload for principals and teachers; and sustaining the programme's momentum.

Principals implementation of a partnership programme changed their perception of PI by giving them more diverse means of working with parents in practical and inclusive ways to achieve shared objectives. This chapter presents a summary of the findings of the research. The relevance and limitations of the study are discussed and finally, recommendations for future research, policy and practice are proposed.

6.1.1 Principals perceptions of PI

Based on their experiences, principals stressed the importance of building strong home school relationships to secure optimum educational experiences for primary school children. Open and inclusive communication practices served to foster positive school climate and trusting rapport with parents, the maintenance of which seemed to require concerted efforts on the part of the principal. Although hindrances to PI existed from within the school due to teacher resistance to PI and for parents because of language and literacy barriers and time-pressure, the principals strived to work within those constraints. This was achieved by being approachable and visible to parents and actively modelling positive interactions with parents to build teacher confidence.

6.1.2 Motivations for participating in a partnership programme

The study showed a range of motivations for principals to participate in a structured framework for partnership, which extended beyond compliance with DE standards. Motivations could be categorised as personal, institutional and context specific. Personally, the principals revealed individualistic traits which motivated them towards partnership; personal vision based on altruistic values, such as inclusion and culturally responsive education; commitment to Special Education; and knowledge and experience brought from prior roles in education such as the role of Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teacher. At an institutional level, principals felt the PSI programme offered a potential alternative to established mechanisms for parental involvement i.e. Parents' Associations or Boards of Management. In particular, the structured nature of the framework was merited with enhancing the format of meetings with parents and other stakeholders. Contextually, in a special school because of differing needs, the principal sought to maximise ways to connect with parents. In schools with ethnically diverse populations, the partnership programme was a means to foster inclusion and mutual understanding between teachers and parents. The partnership programme also provided a forum for schools to establish an identity and links to the local community.

6.1.3 Benefits of a partnership programme

Partnership programmes appear to have particular merit across various educational contexts. These contexts include established and new school communities; special schools; and schools where there are ethnically diverse populations. The non-threatening and structured nature of the ATP meetings seemed to provide a unique educational enterprise, where children and parents came together in the school on a regular basis and engaged in goal setting and decision-making processes. Principals reported that partnership projects had proven beneficial implications for school practice, curriculum and policy. Practically, the physical environment of schools was enhanced by wildlife gardens, outdoor classrooms and multilingual signage. From a curricular perspective, ATP projects contributed to teaching and learning across subjects including Mathematics, English and History. Projects undertaken as part of the partnership programme dovetailed efficiently with SSE and school improvement requirements. Notwithstanding research (Brown *et al.*, 2020) which finds that attempts to include student voice in SSE to be tokenistic, the research data from this study showed that parents and children had meaningfully contributed to decision making

processes. Specific examples of this contribution included projects to deliver literacy, numeracy, SPHE and SESE targets, as part of school self-evaluation. School policy development was delivered by PSI projects to review Anti-Bullying, Homework and Parents as Partners policies across the sample group.

6.1.4 Challenges experienced with the partnership programme

For principals, being a part of the PSI programme requires first and foremost the recruitment of parents, school staff, community members and students to the ATP. The challenges met by schools in terms of recruitment were particularly noticeable in the case of sourcing community members to join the partnership team. Furthermore, the partnership programme requires the implementation, monitoring and review of projects on a continuous basis. As with any initiative, over time, there were instances when principals found that it was burdensome to keep it all going. Principals managed workload by deliberately slowing down the volume and pace of the ATP projects and sought training support, where necessary, from the NPC.

6.1.5 Leadership of the Partnership Programme

Skilled facilitation and leadership to encourage communication and equal input from parents, students and community members was evident in principals' descriptions of enactment of the PSI programme. Principals were aware of their own positionality in the group at partnership meetings. The idea of stepping back to allow others to step up was a leadership strategy common to all of the participants. Examples of leadership being distributed across teacher, parent, student and community members included the rotation of the chair at meetings and the leadership of specific projects being assigned across all member types. While building leadership capacity in this manner, all principals admitted that they maintained control and responsibility for the oversight of the programme as a whole. The relevance of the study and recommendations for future research will now be identified, including policy and practice-based implications.

6.2 Relevance of the Study

This research contributes to the academic literature on the PI and partnership and experiences of Irish primary principals to become involved in a structured framework for partnership. This research contributes to new knowledge as follows:

- This thesis is the first Irish study to examine principals' experiences of participation in a structured framework for partnership with parents
- This is the first study to provide practice-based evidence of the contribution of student and parent voice to school improvement and SSE from the perspective of principals, through the PSI programme. It may be considered a baseline for an under-researched aspect of the Irish education system
- The findings provide a new understanding of how schools actively engage parents and students in decision-making processes
- The study adds to empirical research about
- This thesis adds to the minimal literature on the views and leadership practices of primary school principals in an Irish context relating to parental involvement at primary level
- This research makes important contributions to the current literature on the facilitators and barriers to PI and the benefits and challenges of partnership with parents from the principals' perspective which remains largely undocumented in Ireland

6.3 Limitations

The limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting the findings as is the case with all research in the social sciences. While every effort was made to avoid bias, as outlined in Chapter Three, as an insider in the research, the researchers' interpretation of the data may have been coloured causing unintended bias. Due to the use of a purposive sampling strategy, generalisability to the full population of Irish primary principals is not claimed. As approximately 16% of the total number of schools participating in the PSI programme nationally took part, the researcher proposes that the findings may be generalisable to other principals who operate the programme. The Irish model for Partnership Schools uniquely includes student participation, so is therefore not generalisable to other countries (Scotland, USA) where Epstein's framework is in use. Finally, as the study draws on the view of principals only, the research does not account for the contribution of all member types of the Action Team for Partnership; namely students, teachers, parents and community members. Undoubtedly rich and varied views on the topic of PI and partnership are absent in this study as a result.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

A natural progression of this research would be to investigate the perspectives and experiences of all other stakeholders involved in the PSI partnership programme. In particular, the use of surveys and focus groups could provide a broader picture of the enactment of the programme. As such, further research could be conducted with a sample from parents, students, community and teaching staff to explore the PSI experience from the viewpoint of other stakeholders. By increasing the sample of principal participants, additional perspectives may grow the knowledge and understanding of leadership practices which promote PI as well as other aspects of family school partnership examined in this study.

6.5 Recommendations for policy and practice arising from research

Bronfenbrenner's (1985) theory of human development asserts that children's potential is enhanced by strong connections between the home and school settings and 'that this form of joint activity must be supported by public policies to and practices which support parenthood by providing opportunities for encouragement, good example, stability, examples and above all time from adults in the child's life both within and outside the home.' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 148). With this in mind, the findings of this study have implications for future practice because the research confirmed that the PSI programme offers a viable platform for collaborative decision-making processes which are inclusive of student and parent voice. Partnership programmes may therefore add value to schools by supporting the school self-evaluation process. At the time of this study, the number of participating schools was forty-four nationally, representing just 1.5% of schools in Ireland. A reasonable approach could be the development of efforts to enhance the messaging and positioning of PSI to increase its reach to all potential school communities including families and teachers as a priority. In doing so the coalition of the DE, NPC, IPPN may position the PSI programme as a quality support to schools which offers a structured approach to building dialogue, partnership and developing meaningful home school links.

The research also provided examples of good leadership practices relating to PI and Partnership such as facilitation of partnership meetings, building leadership capacity and developing communication with parents. A key policy priority should therefore be to provide school leaders and staff with professional development to equip them to understand

the importance of working with parents, barriers to PI, effective communication with parents and strategies for engaging with parents. In-service professional development platforms for school leaders are available from the DE, INTO⁹ and also through membership of professional networks such as patron management bodies which could provide an accessible forum for such training.

The study established strong evidence relating to the integration of SSE with the partnership activities in the PSI programme. There is scope for a review of national policy documents relating to SSE to include guidelines for schools to enhance the quality of collaborative decision-making processes which include students, parents, schools and communities. Processes and templates drawn from the PSI framework may form a basis for usable resources of this nature.

6.6 Conclusion

The recognition of parents' rights as stakeholders in the education of their children is well established. The dynamic relationship between schools and families is critical to child development and learner outcomes. This study provided a unique opportunity to see and hear the true nature of principals' perceptions of the concept of parental involvement and partnership and numerous strategies they employ to build those connections. A rare glimpse at principals' opinions of DE guidelines and mandated structures, such as Parents' Associations, was seen and it seemed that alternative types of parental involvement were welcomed. The study suggests that partnership programmes provide an opportunity to advance the position of parents and students as decision-makers in school development planning while principals gain varied modes of working with parents in practical, inclusive ways to achieve shared objectives.

⁹ INTO: The Irish National Teachers Organisation the main trade union representing primary teachers in Ireland

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Appendices

Appendix A: DE Circulars relating to PI

Appendix B: Process for developing conceptual framework following Jabareen (2009)

Appendix C: Excel for Interview Administration and Plain Language Statement

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Appendix E: Discussion Topics

Appendix F: Sample Interview Transcript

Appendix G: NPC Approval for research

Appendix H: DCU Ethics Committee Approval letter

Appendix I: Reflective journal

Appendix J: PSI Template Jumping Hurdles

Appendix K: PSI Template for planning and recording ATP projects

Appendix L: School Self-Evaluation Report: BOM legislative checklist (Primary)

Appendix M: ATP Projects relating to School Self Evaluation (SSE)

Appendix N. Six Step Process of School Self Evaluation

Appendix O. Key findings per setting and the similarities/ differences in how the initiative was implemented in each setting

Appendix A: DE Circulars relating to PI

- Circular 27/91 *Parents as Partners* (Department of Education and Science, 1991) is significant to the concept of parental involvement as it pre-empts the directive of the Education Act 1998 (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010) and endorses NPC at a national level. The language of partnership, relationships and cooperation between families and schools is foregrounded in the document (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010). At local level *Parents as Partners* requires schools to form a Parents' Association, develop a partnership with parents, and to develop a clearly defined policy for productive parental involvement as part of its overall school policy/plan. (Department of Education and Science, 1991)
- DES Circular 0016/2018 *School Self Evaluation (SSE)* calls for school management to elicit the views of staff, parents and pupils in a cycle of self-evaluation, target setting and data analysis to improve learner outcomes (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p. 25). This process culminates in an annual report communicated to the entire school community. School principals and their teams are directed to ensure that this report is accessible to parents, who must be made aware of the school's policies and of the school's compliance with requirements that support good teaching and learning (Skerritt *et al.*, 2021, p. 10). There is evidence that this development in Irish education has been adopted in some Irish schools (Brown, McNamara, O'Brien, Skerritt, O'Hara, *et al.*, 2020, p. 94):

Evidence of student and parent voice as part of the SSE documentation and school policies suggests that consultation with one or both stakeholder groups has actually occurred. (Brown *et al.*, 2020, p. 94)

A connection may be drawn between the SSE process and the PSI programme. The PSI requires schools to select an area for school improvement and then develop targets and a one-year action plan. One of the aims of this study is to establish how participating schools linked school self-evaluation to the PSI partnership programme.

- Circular 0070/201 *Leadership and Management in Primary Schools* directs schools to follow guidance on best practice through the framework document *Looking at our School 2022* (LAOS) (Department of Education, 2022). LAOS is a quality framework setting out standards for schools in Ireland under the two headings 1)

Teaching and Learning and 2) Leadership. Parental and community partnership is specifically referenced, and the document calls on school principals to establish 'very constructive' relationships with parents, to seek and listen to the opinions of others and to formally engage in very effective dialogue with partners (ibid., p.39). The LAOS framework is part of an inspection model that complements school self-improvement activity and is designed to include the whole-school community in that process (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012, p. 82). The LAOS framework, related policy documents and circulars inform the practice of participating principals in this study and so, provide pertinent reference points for the research.

Appendix B: Process for developing conceptual framework following Jabareen (2009)

Phase	Activity	Time frame	Application within this study
1. Mapping the selected data sources	Selection of texts and commencement of reading for Lit Review sometimes labelled 'scoping'	Jun-Oct 2020 & beyond	All peer reviewed journal articles, books, reports relating to PI and Partnership using Google Scholar, DCU library, SAGE methods
2. Extensive reading and categorizing of the selected data	Read and Categorize data by scale of importance and representative power	Oct 2020 – April 2021	Development of the Lit Rev. Compilation of the reference list for the Lit Rev using Zotero (total refs were ca.280). Identification of key thinkers and extraction of key theories and findings relating to PI and Partnership from the literature.
3. Identifying and naming the concepts	Re-read literature Reflect on and list key concepts which emerge. Which theories bear most significance to the topic?	June 2020 – April 2021	Identify the wider significance of the theories associated with the phenomenon. Consultation with supervisors regarding the development and presentation of Literature Review Consider developing a research design consistent with context of the study.
4. Deconstructing and categorizing the concepts	Create a table with a column per item (Name the concepts; describe each one; categorize by epistemological, ontological, methodological role; list references)	April 2021 – April 2022	Moving from the descriptive (micro) issues within the data to an analytical level of thinking (Trafford and Leshem). Following data collection, Application of theories from Literature Review to data collected (interview transcripts)
5. Integrating the concepts	Group the concepts – reduce the number!	Sept 2021 – Sept 2022	Analytical to Conceptual interpretation of the Literature and link to data gathered.
6. Synthesis, re-synthesis and 'making it all make sense'	Findings and Discussion. Stay 'open and tolerant' to the emerging new theory	Jan 2022 – Jan 2023	Revisit Literature with final review of findings and discussion chapters to consolidate the final CF revision
7. Validating the CF	Seek 'outsider' view to ensure this makes sense not just to the researcher. Consultation with supervisors and colleagues	March 2022 – March 2023	Present the CF to supervisors and colleagues at Unconference May 2022
8. Rethinking the CF	Last check that the theory or CF is dynamic and can be revised.	Sept 2022 - present	Final revision of CF before submission of thesis. Adjust based on previous stage. Submission Spring 2023.

Appendix C: Excel for Interview Administration including Plain Language Statement and Informed Consent Form

Timeline for Data collection	
26 Jan-21	Permission / Support for Doctoral Research
Feb-21	NPC Email
Mar-21	Follow up with some schools who expressed interest at meeting
Apr-21	Schedule interviews
Apr-21	Followed up with a number of schools across a range of locations and school types
May-21	Commence interviews
May-21	Go Transcript subscription

Checklist (Must Have)

Participant	School	Role	County	Sch Type	Students	IV Date	Time	Inf Consent	ZOOM	Back up	Rec'd IV Question Prompt sheet
INITIAL	1	Principal	C	Urban Mixed	350+	30-Apr	9.15am	Yes	https://us02web	Mobile ph	No (suggested Prompt sheet)
INITIAL	2	Principal	MN	GNS	220+	19-May	3.30pm	Yes	https://zoom.us	Mobile ph	Yes
INITIAL	3	Principal	D	Urban Mixed	800+	20-May	9.15am	Yes	https://zoom.us	Mobile ph	Yes
INITIAL	4	Principal	D	SNS	450+	21-May	9.15am	Yes	https://zoom.us	Mobile ph	Yes
INITIAL	5	Principal	KY	Rural	20+			Yes	No Show		
INITIAL	6	Principal	D	Special	25+	01-Jun	3.00pm	Yes	https://zoom.us	Mobile ph	Yes
INITIAL	7	ired Princ	D	Urban Mixed	800+	31-May	3.00pm	Yes	https://us02web	Mobile ph	Yes
INITIAL	8	Principal	WD	GNS	200+	11-May	3.30pm	Yes	https://us02web	Mobile ph	Yes

*Check Technology

Plain Language Statement for Principal Participants

Researcher: Heidi Collins, Doctor of Education, Year 3, IoE, DCU, St Patrick's Campus, Dublin 9.

Supervisors: Dr Maura Coulter and Dr Marie Flynn

Title: Exploring primary principals' perceptions and practices of partnership with particular reference to the PSI initiative

Oversight Contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000. E-mail rec@dcu.ie

Dear _____,

My name is Heidi Collins. I am a doctoral student in the School of Human Development in DCU undertaking research under the supervision of Dr Maura Coulter and Dr Marie Flynn. I work as a primary principal in Dublin 15 and have a keen interest in family, school and community partnerships. In my school, I have participated in the NPC Partnership Schools Ireland programme for the last three years.

The research topic: This qualitative study explores primary school principals' perceptions and practices of partnership with particular reference to their experience of Partnership School Ireland (PSI). Specifically, the research explores the motivations, practices, challenges and benefits of the initiative from the principals' point of view. The study aims to add to the knowledge and understanding of research-based models of partnership in school communities and inform future school leaders of the potential of such models.

Summary of what participation involves: If you agree to participate in the research, you would be required to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately forty-five minutes. In the event of clarification being required, another short follow up semi structured interview would be arranged. Ideally, the researcher, Heidi Collins, would visit your school to conduct the interview but due to the current Covid-19 restrictions, a video call using Zoom may be arranged in keeping with Public Health advice. No documentation, policies or photographs from the participants' school will be requested or required. Participants will be sent the first draft of the findings of the study to ensure that data has been reported accurately and interpreted correctly by the researcher.

Benefits to participants from involvement in the Research Study: It is envisaged that engagement with the process will afford participants (8-10 primary principals) an opportunity to engage in reflective practice and gain clarity around the concept of partnership in their context.

Data Protection/Privacy Notice (Personal Data – GDPR Compliance):

Confidentiality of all information will be assured and I will place the utmost importance on the protection of your anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. No personal details will be sought in the semi-structured interview. All data will be handled in line with DCU GDPR, see [DCU Data Protection Unit](#). Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some profession. Data will be available to the Heidi Collins (Researcher) and her supervisors (Dr Maura Coulter and Dr Marie Flynn) only and will be protected within the legal limitations of data confidentiality.

Data will be stored on password protected PC's in the locked office/workspace of the researchers. No personal data (names, identity) will be linked to these data. In accordance with DCU data protection policies, all records will be disposed of once the research is complete and no later than 5 years after the research. Data collected will be included in a doctoral thesis and may inform future studies, conference proceedings or academic publications. Heidi Collins will act as Data Controller and Data Processor for this research and DCU Data Protection Officer is Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie Ph: 7005118 / 7008257.) Should you feel that there has been any breach of individual data protection rights a complaint may be lodged with the [Irish Data Protection Commission](#). you may withdraw consent at any point by contacting the primary researcher (Heidi.Collins8@mail.dcu.ie Ph: 0866018757).

Further information and Research Findings: You will be kept up to date regarding the ongoing findings as the project progresses. A full summary of findings will be provided when the project is complete.

Many thanks for taking the time to read and consider participating in this project. Should you have any further questions please contact:

Heidi Collins Heidi.Collins8@mail.dcu.ie Ph: 0866018757 (Primary Researcher)

Dr Maura Coulter Maura.coulter@dcu.ie (Supervisor)

Dr Marie Flynn marie.flynn@dcu.ie (Supervisor)

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: *The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie*

Informed Consent Form for Principal Participants

Research Study Title: Exploring primary principals' perceptions and practices of parental partnership with particular reference to the PSI initiative

Researchers: Heidi Collins, Dr Maura Coulter, Dr Marie Flynn,

Clarification of the purpose of the research: I understand that this research is being undertaken to explore primary school principals' perceptions and practices of partnership with particular reference to their experience of Partnership School Ireland (PSI). Specifically, the research explores the motivations, practices, challenges and benefits of the initiative from the principals' point of view. To participate in this study, I will take part in a 45-60 minute semi structured interview with the doctoral researcher either face to face or if necessary on Zoom.

Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary: I am aware that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw consent at any point by contacting the primary researcher, Heidi Collins.

Confirmation of arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations: I know that Heidi Collins is the Data Controller and the Data Processor for this research and DCU Data Protection Officer. I am aware that if I feel that there has been any breach of individual data protection rights a complaint may be lodged with the Irish Data Protection Commission. I am aware that I will be assured of anonymity in the final write up of the research through the use of pseudonyms My anonymity and that of all respondents will be protected during all stages of the research process and at no time will the case study location, schools or teachers be identifiable; pseudonyms will be assigned for the purpose of discussion.

Confirmation of arrangements regarding retention/disposal of data: I am aware that any information disclosed in the research will be coded and confidentially stored. I accept that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some profession. Data will be available to Heidi Collins (Researcher) and her supervisors (Dr Maura Coulter and Dr Marie Flynn) only and will be protected within the legal limitations of data confidentiality. Data will be stored on password protected PC's in the locked office/workspace of the researchers. No personal data (names, identity) will be linked to these data. In accordance with DCU data protection policies, all records will be disposed of once the research has been completed or before a five year period has elapsed.

Confirmations relating to any other relevant information as indicated in the Plain Language Statement: I give consent that data collected will be included in a doctoral thesis and may inform future studies, conference proceedings or academic publications.

Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)
Yes/No

I understand the information provided *Yes/No*

I understand the information provided in relation to data protection

Yes/No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study

Yes/No

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions

Yes/No

I am aware that my interview may take place through Zoom and will be audiotaped

Yes/No

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participants Signature:

Name in Block Capitals:

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Describe your school a little. How many years as a PSI school?

Parental Involvement (General)

1. How would you define parental involvement and what does meaningful parental involvement look like?
2. Where does the motivation for PI come from? (DES? Schools? Parents?)
3. What have you found to be a hindrance or barrier to PI?
4. Do you think parental involvement is valued in Ireland? Any reasons for your answer?
5. What opportunities arise from PI (for you, the school, the parent, the child)?

Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI)

1. Would you like to tell me about what guided the school's decision to participate in the PSI initiative? Where did you hear about it? The complete story of how it came about.
2. Can you tell me about the selection process of the Action Team for Partnership (ATP)?
3. What challenges did you encounter in setting up the team?
4. Was there resistance from any group (teachers, parents, students) to the process? Can you tell me more about this?
5. Are Newly Qualified Teachers prepared for engagement in Partnership Programmes as a result of their training? Should they be?
6. What were the ATP meetings like? Prompt: Similar or different to Staff / Parents Association meetings? Could you describe the differences or similarities between the work of an ATP and a Parents' Association?
7. How did you find communication within the group? Were there any creative ways or strategies used to encourage everyone to speak / contribute?
8. Have any school-wide processes or policies changed because of the work of the ATP?
9. Which, if any, areas of school policy does the work of the ATP support?
10. Did the work of the ATP tie in with school self-evaluation? How?
11. How were the 'targets' decided? What was the conversation like when deciding what should be prioritised?
12. How were the outcomes of each project monitored? Who undertook the work of monitoring this? Did this create a challenge?
13. Any good news stories from PSI to share? Where has it had most benefits?
14. What would you do differently if you were to start over again? What would you add to the programme? Any learning you took from the Networking events?
15. Which of your leadership skills and practices which you think helped most with the partnership process?
16. How does the PSI and the idea of partnership connect to your personal vision for your school?
17. We have spoken about Parental Involvement and about Partnership. Is there a difference between those two things? If so, what? If not, why?
18. Has participation with PSI changed your view of parental involvement?

COVID 19

1. Did the Action Team for Partnership operate OR have any significant impact or projects during the Covid 19 school closures or restrictions?
2. Has Covid had impact on PI in your opinion?
3. **Anything you would like to say or add that did not come up in the interview?**

Appendix E: Discussion Topics

May 2021

Dear _____

Many thanks for returning the signed consent forms for my research. I look forward to meeting you next week online and our conversation will follow the topics outlined below.

Discussion Topics

We will begin by talking about Parental Involvement (PI) in general.

- What motivates us, as principals, to involve parents?
- What are the things that help and hinder PI?

Next, we will discuss your experiences with Partnership Schools Ireland (PSI).

- The story of how and why you became involved in the initiative.
- Challenges and Benefits you have noted.
- Differentiating PSI from the work of Parents Association.
- Impact of PSI on school life; policy, practice, SSE?
- Leadership practices which you think helped the partnership process.
- How the PSI connects to your personal vision for your school.

Finally, we will reflect on the impact of Covid 19 on the work of PSI.

Thank you once again for supporting my research.

Sincerely,

Heidi Collins

Appendix F: Sample Interview Transcript

(Interviewer questions are in bold, and the respondent carries time-stamp and is non-bold)

HC: Just to get us started, in general, how would you define parental involvement what does meaningful parental involvement look like?

Principal, School 6: 2:15

Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Oh, well, I suppose that there's the ideal and that there's the various levels, kind of below the idea that if you like, and I suppose I've always felt that parents should be involved in schools and in their children's education, and research backs that up, you know. Once parents are involved, children benefit. And I think I suppose if we can get into the mindset that as educators and as parents, we have a common purpose. And the common purpose is that we want children to flourish, and to grow and to learn and to have every opportunity to learn and have the tools and the skills to learn as they progress, then I think it makes partnership a little bit easier. How parents are involved, I'd say, the list is endless, really. And it can be as simple as being involved in homework and ensuring that, you know, parents have an interest in homework and supervise homework and ask about the day at school and how was it and how did it go. And you know, what happened there and what did you learn today. It can be as simple as that to parents' associations, to boards of management's to partnership schools, and to volunteering in the school for all sorts of different activities, sports days, book fairs, paired reading, guided reading, supervising traffic, direct and traffic, you know, it can be anything, and I think there are an absolute myriad of ways for our parents to be involved in schools

Principal, School 6: 4:55

You know, it's a matter of sitting down and thinking about challenge. In your context and saying, what can we do here to involve parents. And even putting the message out there, that you're open to having parents involved, I think is really important, because a lot of people come at this from their own, I suppose memories of school, you know, as parents, maybe they didn't have great memories of their school days. So, you know, just a positive perspective. And, you know, an openness towards parents and towards having them involved in school, I think is more important than anything else. And then you'll find the ways, there are lots of ways. Yeah.

HC: What does meaningful parent involvement look like for?

Principal, School 6: 5:52

Yeah. Yeah, I think, I think the meaningful base comes when you're talking about probably about policy development, and the vision for the school, and whether everybody is on the same page, and whether everybody is, has the same idea about what the school you know, the vision of the school is and where it's going, and how we're going to get there. And to be honest, for me, the partnership schools project was a really meaningful way to get people involved. And to get parents involved. I think sometimes parents' associations with the best will in the world, they tend to fall into the fundraising side of things, you know, and that.

I suppose I've always found our parents Association, great in terms of policies and plans, and, you know, running ideas past them and getting ideas from them. But I think the partnership schools one, even by virtue of the name partnership, it's not about, you know, give me your thoughts on this, it's, it's genuinely about a partnership between home and school. So I think that's what meaningful engagement really looks like, it's about the genuine partnership.

HC: And when you talk about Parental Involvement, you said people can come from their memories or experiences what other hindrances or barriers have you seen in terms of parental involvement?

Principal, School 6: 7:29

Um, I suppose I just in my own experience, I think the culture in the school can be a huge barrier. It, you know, and I'm going back, like, I'm here a long time now. And I know, when I took on the role, one of the things that I really wanted to address was that barrier between school and home, and the whole 'them and us' mentality. And, you know, the whole, this is the front door, and we'll come to the front door, and you can come to the front door, but neither of us is going to cross the threshold in either direction.

Yeah. And, you know, we, we make the rules, and you follow them. And that is, and we'll talk to you when there's a problem but we won't talk to you otherwise. And so, I think that that whole culture of, of welcome, and inclusiveness and even, you know, parents feeling they can ring and say, Look, I have a bit of problem today. I think that's the first thing that needs to happen. But that openness and willingness to involve, or to listen, really.

I think expectation can be a bit of a barrier to and, you know, I think school leaders and school teachers probably need to manage parent expectations in terms of, you know, in terms of certain aspects of school life, you know, we'd, you know, I'd often say to my parents Association, and they would say to me, we're not going to agree on everything. And sometimes you're just going to have to trust that I might have a bit more information than you have, that this is how it has to be. But, you know, I think there has to be that kind of management of expectations, maybe in terms of what parents can and cannot do, around the school. Yeah. In our particular case, and one of the big barriers to involvement is a language barrier, because we have a very high percentage of children and families with English as an additional language. So that really does present a barrier. You know, and it's difficult to get those parents involved in a meaningful way. And again, the partnership schools project was a great way to address that barrier. And I suppose the other thing really would be parents and it's a bit again, was a big one here for us, it might not be the case in every school, was certainly in our school, you know, we'd have families who've lived in the area for generations. And you know, grandmothers and mummies would not have great memories of their time at school. Some of them, not all of them, but some of them. And, you know, that is a barrier to their own involvement. And if there's a problem, the default position is nothing's changed here, it's still the same as it always was, you know, so, and then I think people's own levels of literacy and education, probably are a barrier as well. You know, if they can't read communication that's going home if they can't access the information, you know, we sent home a note today, and just about something to happening

tomorrow. One of the dads was driving by the gate, and he stopped, the car ran down the window, “What's this about? I can't read it! What's it about?” Anyway he couldn't read it.

HC: I'm hearing something else there – you were at the gate! So, this is where the principal comes in – out there with your mask on! (Both laugh). So, I'm delighted to talk to you because it's good to hear from principals outside Dublin – do you think parental involvement is valued here in Ireland does it carry much weight?

Principal, School 6: 11:36

I don't know. And I think that's a tough one to answer. Really, I think we do a lot of talking about it. And we do a lot of talking about partners and partnership with was whether it's truly valued our whether, I think we still have a bit of a way to go, to be perfectly honest, you know, and again, I think it's that, you know, you think you're making great strides forward, and then there might be a bit of an issue, and you're kind of back to God's sake, what do they want? You know, and you kind of have to say, Okay, look, let's back up and start again, you know, so, you know, I think it's, I don't think we're there yet. It's more and more valued. And I, I also, I would also say that it's probably maybe different types of school value parents in different ways and value parental involvement in different ways, purely from the point of view of governance structures and patronage. And, you know, they have a different approach from day one. So I, you know, I think I have no scientific evidence for that whatsoever. They're just my own thoughts.

HC: Where do you think the motivation comes from for principals to be working on all this parental involvement?

Principal, School 6: 13:11

Okay. Again, I can only speak personally. And for me, it's very much about what can we do as a school, to give every child in the school the best possible experience of school, and the best opportunity to learn and to be the best she can be? And I honestly don't believe we can do that by ourselves. I think we need parents to back us up. Something I always say, you know, what kind of information meetings for parents or kind of induction meetings for parents when you know, the children are coming in. If you take a school year, from the first of September to the 31st of August, children spend 11% of that year at school. Now, there are so many expectations around what school can do. And you know, what school should to its 11% of a child's time, in the year. So I always say to parents, we need your help here. Because you know, you can't expect your child to flourish, and to learn and to make them the best possible progress. If you're depending on 11% of her time, no matter what we do. We're not major miracle workers. So we need your help here. So, you know, I worked it out, because I think that's good for teachers to know, too. Because, you know, they work so hard, and you know, they worry so much and they give so much of their own time and

energy and you know, they also need to understand they can't do it all themselves. You know, so yeah, yeah. So that's where that's the motivation. For me, what can we do to make this place the best possible place for all children? Yeah.

HC: Thanks so much and it's lovely hearing it from another perspective and I'm definitely going to write down, that 11%, it's not something that ever occurred to me! Will we move on to the nitty gritty of the actual PSI now, I think, just to tell me the story of what guided the school's decision to participate, where you heard about it, just that full story of how it came about.

Principal, School 6 15:45

Yeah, I suppose it came about as a lot of things do. It's more about who you know than what you know. So I'm kind of involved quite a bit with IPPN. And (names contact) ... she was looking for schools to participate in the pilot project. So, she contacted me and sent me information about and asked me, would I be willing? Or would the school be willing to take part? So that's how we got involved. I think we were one of our first cohort of schools to get involved.

HC: How many years ago is that?

Principal, School 6:

Oh, gee, and it's probably I'd say, it's maybe five or six years ago, and six years ago, maybe at this stage? I couldn't tell you. Yeah, yeah, it was around that time. And it probably it took us a while to get going just because of training issues. One thing and another, it just took us a while to get off the ground. So it could have been maybe the guts of the year between saying, Yes, we will do this and actually getting going. So that's really where, where I heard about it first, and you know, where I loved the idea. And I suppose it just at the time, it just seemed to me to fit really well with this whole school self evaluation process, which was kicking off at that time. You know, there were rumblings about the parent and then the charter at the same time, and I thought, okay, let's kill two birds with one stone here. But, you know, I kind of kind of feel if you can do things smarter. Why not? So that's really where I got involved, or how our school got involved in there.

HC: So you were an early adapter?

Principal, School 6 : Yep ..early adapter

HC: I'll just run through specific questions about the ATP – do you want to tell me about the selection process for the ATP, any challenges, resistance?

Principal, School 6:

Yes. Um, I, there was no resistance, what I would say was that in terms of the children, there really wasn't an issue, because, you know, it was easy enough just to talk to staff and to talk, you know, and selecting the children was very easy. And staff members, I was fortunate in that staff two staff members volunteered and said they were interested and willing to take it on. So that was, you know, kind of fortunate from that perspective. And I suppose the biggest challenge lay in maybe, kind of getting two people from the community and two people from, two parents. And I suppose I saw it as an opportunity maybe to involve parents who weren't involved in parents Association, you know, kind of weren't

very active in the parents Association and I also saw it as an opportunity to involve a parent who didn't speak English as their first language. And so it was just trying to identify two people who would be willing to work with us. And you know, who would kind of fit into those categories if you like? And that took a bit of time. And in the end, the two people I approached said, yes, they would, they were happy to take it on. And then the hardest part for me was finding two people in the community who would be willing to get involved. And it's not that there weren't people willing, but I suppose I just wanted people who genuinely would have had an interest in the school and you know, all the visual interest in working with us. So we ended up with one of the ladies in the local (names local group) group she's manages the local (names local group) group, and one of the librarians from the local library. And they were fantastic. Jeepers, fantastic. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So the biggest, the biggest challenge was just pulling the team together. And I think, to have success, you need the right people on board. So it was just important for me, I suppose to spend the time trying to get the right people so that we could have a bit of any success and, you know, convince everybody else around us that this was a good, a good idea.

HC: What were the ATP meetings like? Could you describe the differences or similarities between the work of an ATP and a Parents' Association?

Principal, School 6:

Yeah. Well, a completely different, I would say, in a very positive way. And that's not anything about the parents' association meetings, because it's a different function and a different context. And, you know, I don't think there's a negative or positive, one against the other. And the big difference is that the children are there. And, you know, is required, as adults, that we were clear in what we were saying, because the children needed to understand and we had we had children from third, fourth, fifth and sixth class, I think, initially. So, you know, we, we needed them to understand what was going on, we needed them to be involved. So whatever we did, we have to be able to involve them. And, and I suppose the big thing for me was once it was up and running, I wasn't organising the nations. I wasn't managing the meetings, I attended them. And sometimes they had a job afterwards, and that was fine. And that was fine. But the big thing for me was that, you know, I was just invited along to the meeting. And that was great, because there was nothing for me to do before. And yeah, it was, you know, you know, what it's like, that's hugely. It is. It is. It's kind of, I suppose I find it a bit difficult in the beginning, and I had to teach myself to keep my track shows and not to be interrupting was, yeah, so it was one and what the children brought, the whole process was fantastic. They were just so enthused, and so interested, and so willing, it was just fantastic. Really, yeah.

To be honest, if again, it was it wasn't me, it was one of the staff agreed that she would lead the group. And so she came prepared. And she, you know, she would have had little, initially, she would have a little warm up exercises that we could all do together, which was lovely. And, and then she would have an, I suppose sometimes she would have a simplified version of whatever we're working on for the children so that they could kind of work away on something. Maybe while the adults were having a separate conversation about the same topic, and then we'd all come together at the end to compare notes. And there wasn't anything specific. It was a matter of Okay, this is what we're going to work on today. And

then at the start of every meeting, we'd go back over what we had planned and discussed and you know, if I anybody was to bring anything back to the meeting

25:18

Yes, I think so. And I think to be honest, and what worked was, we decided early in the PSI process was we wanted to do. So, we came up with ideas, and some of those ideas came from the parents, or one of our staff members was one of our SNAs, and she had lovely ideas. And, and, you know, then the two community people saw the school from a different perspective. And they had great ideas, and the children had ideas. So, we kind of decided early, okay, these are the areas we want to address, and these are the things we like to do. So that gave us the focus, and then everybody was able to contribute from there. And it wasn't every meeting, everybody had something really worthwhile to say it was just overtime. You know? Yeah.

HC: Have any school-wide processes or policies changed because of the work of the ATP?

Yeah, one of the big things that changed for us, and I suppose one of the big initiatives that came out of the about for us was what we call our School Name awards. So, and it came from a comment that was made at the meeting. And that, you know, I suppose we, which, like every school, we try to focus on the positive, and then we kind of, you know, sometimes the children with the negative behaviour, you're so focused on them and trying to be positive and rewarding them for being good. And for all the rest of us, that the children who are just getting on with this are sometimes left behind or not that they're left behind, but they don't get any attention. Because all your attention is focused on trying to encourage the positive behaviour and the other children. So we came up with this idea of rewarding the positive behaviour. And kind of that brought in, you know, how would we go about this. So, one of the team, one of the community members did a lot of work with our fourth and fifth classes around children's rights and their responsibilities, because we were really clear that you know, along with a right that goes responsibility, so they came up with their rights and responsibilities as citizens of our school. And then they came up with a little kind of nomination sheet. So what we have now is, any week, any member of staff, it doesn't matter who it is, can be the caretaker can nominate any child in school for an award based on the characteristics of the (Award Name) of our school. So caring, trustworthy, honest, all of those things. And our fifth class takes those nominations on Friday morning, and they decide who the (Award Name) of the week is that we chop off the names off top. So it's an anonymous thing. They don't know who they're picking. And at assembly on Friday, we announce who our (Award Name) is for the week, then we have a (Award Name) of the month, and we have a (Award Name) of the year. So that is something that's something really positive that has come out of it for us. And they love us the current language stage, you know? Yeah. It is. Yes. Yeah, absolutely. I'm just trying to think what the literal I can tell you what the numeracy one was, we were, we were looking at shape and space in maths. So again, one of our parents, I remember now with the literacy, actually, that was one of the parents in the group, and it was the mom who didn't speak English as her first language. And she said, you know, sometimes I find it very hard to understand some of the language you know, I Understand it in my own language post, you know, I'd love if there was a picture or something that could help me. So we came up with the idea of shape and space

dictionary. So at that huge amount of work went into it. Now I have to say, really and truly, you know, so we looked at the language of shape and space from junior infants to sixth class, and put together this booklet, and then we gave it to the ATP. And they went through with a fine tooth comb and edited it. And then we published it. So you know, that was lovely. That was really nice. Yeah, so we important we give one every year when our junior infants come in as part of their pack, they get that. And then the other one, which is it's had a lasting impact as well was, again, one of the parents said that Aster had taken off in a big way in school, in junior and senior infants. And she'd had a child who just finished first class. And she said, you know, she really loved Aistear in junior and senior infants. And it would have been great if there was something similar in first class on a more formal basis, with just something to follow on from Aistear. So, we came up with this idea of what we called (Project Name). So, it's just a thematic approach to literacy in first and second class. So we've kind of worked it up to person second class now. So, we have a team and loads of resources and materials that are there for it.

HC: So, a lasting change?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. And again, I like I suppose I'd be a firm believer in you know, just choose one thing and do it well. And, you know, pick whatever small area we're working on, it's good self- evaluation. Well look, why would you go off on another tangent and try and do something else to better fit it all in there and see what we can come up with and, and embed it then. Because I often feel that there are fantastic ideas and a huge amount of time and effort goes into them. And then in two-years' time nobody even knows about them or knows what they are. So, I think if you're putting the work in, you need to be able to embed it. And you know, seeing the benefits offered as time goes on.

HC: How were the outcomes of each project monitored? Who undertook the work of monitoring this? Did this create a challenge?

Principal, School 6 33:08

I did that it was just something I was interested in. No. So I, you know, I just kind of as we went along, I was keeping a little record and keeping notes of what had changed, or you know, what improvements we have made are, what works and what didn't work, you know, those kinds of little things. But that was because I had a genuine interest other people could have done. It wasn't as good as I was just interested, I suppose in looking at it and seeing Well, you know, did this have any impact at all in our school?.

HC: Any good news stories from PSI to share? Where has it had most benefits?

Principal, School 6: 34:06

Um, I think, probably for me, the biggest benefit was the demonstration of how when the team comes together, with no agenda other than making the school a better place, then things to happen. And there was nobody there for the ego. There was nobody there for the glory. And, you know, we were all just there to say, Oh, you know, it's a think tank. We can come up with the craziest ideas under the sun, it doesn't matter. There's no pressure, there's no inspector going to say did you do it? Did you not do it? And, you know, so it was just, I think a really good way of coming up with ideas and giving everybody in the school community all the stakeholders an opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way and that

that word meaningful as well. Really, really important, you know. So that was the benefit for me. And it just demonstrated that things can happen when people work together.

HC: What would you do differently if you were to start over again? What would you add to the programme?

Principal, School 6: 35:17

I suppose initially for the first couple of years, we stuck with it. And that, I think it changed kind of organically if you like, because, you know, parents moved on, and then different children moved in. And that's, I suppose that I would see as one of the challenges for us, that kind of transition from one team to another team. And, you know, maintaining that kind of momentum. And, and to be honest, I think, you know, initially when something is new, you kind of dive in headlong as well. And, you know, you learn to take your foot off the pedal after a while, and you know, you can't keep up that pace all the time. So I think we probably we've slowed down. And that's no harm. And COVID, obviously, through this better a bit of a spanner in the works. But yeah, that would have been one of the challenges, I think, and the fact that we'd had the training once. So when new people came on board, and new staff wanted to be involved, the training wasn't available to them. And then, you know, they were doing kind of videos and different kinds of ways of trying to reach out to schools and Lincoln with schools. So I suppose that would have been fairly, that would have been a challenge for us.

HC: We have spoken about Parental Involvement and about Partnership. Is there a difference between those two things? If so, what? If not, why?

Principal, School 6 37:31

Between parental involvement and the partnership? Well, I think the word actually is probably the difference between the involvement and partnership, or are two different things really. And I suppose maybe that's a bit of a mind shift. If we're talking about meaningful engagement and meaningful involvement, maybe partnership really is what we should be talking about, rather than just parental involvement. And so, you know, that for me would be it's the difference between saying, I'll give you a dig over, I'll give you a handout, or I'll do a bit of fundraising. And, well, we're equal partners in this enterprise here, you know, that we're, we're equal partners in making sure these children get everything they need, you know, and there is a difference there.

HC: Has participation with PSI changed your view of parental involvement?

Principal, School 6: That's a mindset, I think, in our culture. And, you know, it doesn't happen overnight. It has, I suppose. I probably wouldn't have gotten involved. Really, if I had a very different view. You know what I mean? I think I was probably predisposed (*laughing*). Because, you know, when I heard about it, I kind of went, Oh, yeah. Oh, okay. And so, you know, it's, it's given me a different means and a different method and a different way of, of involving the parents. But I think, you know, deep down, I suppose it was maybe always there.

HC: Just on Covid, firstly, did the Action Team for Partnership operate OR have any significant impact or projects during the Covid 19 school closures or restrictions?

Principal, School 6 38:15

No, it didn't, no, we just said No. It was just too much to be honest

HC: And do you think Covid will have an impact on parental involvement?

Principal, School 6: 39:01

Well, that's an interesting one. I don't know. I think it certainly gave parents a new perspective on learning and a new perspective on how hard teachers work and a new perspective on what it takes to engage children in learning. It was interesting just the other day a staff member mentioned to me that we had done the Parent Teacher meetings calls during the lockdowns and one parent had mentioned to her that she was fascinated by how well her child had behaved on the class Zoom calls and the teacher said – that's just how they are in the classroom – and the parent said 'no no that's not how she is!' and she was fascinated by the whole thing that 'oh she pays attention, she doesn't act up, she sits on the chair!!' (laughing) so I think it probably gives parents a new perspective and understanding of and I hope a new value – I'd hope that schools are valued more.

I think for all of us – parents and teachers I think it has given us a much bigger understanding of the importance of school in a child's life. It's not just about literacy and numeracy – I think that's a big learning for all of us and I would hope that we don't forget that.

In terms of parental involvement, I think we've found new ways to communicate with parents and I think that's really good. I don't know that there's any need to ask people to come out at night any more for information meetings or class meetings – we've found a new way to do that, um, and I think the importance of communication has probably been highlighted as well that we just need to keep talking to each other and kind of be a bit more understanding that parents are under pressure and there are huge pressures on families that we didn't really recognise before and we didn't kind of acknowledge before.

I don't know, I'd hope it would have a positive impact on people's positivity towards schools and maybe people's willingness to be involved because of that positivity

HC: I was going to ask you about NQTs and their preparation to be involved

Principal, School 6: 41:40

I think the culture of the school in which they work will have much more influence on their approach to parents and their partnership with parents than anything they would learn pre-service. And certainly, thinking back to my own days as a newly qualified teacher in the school I was working in then the habits that I formed then are the habits that I have now, the things I learnt then are the things I know now and have a much greater understanding of parents.

Appendix G: NPC Approval for research

Tue, 26 Jan 2021, 15:00

Aine Lynch <alynch@npc.ie>

to me

Hi Heidi

Thank you for your email. Your research looks very interesting and NPC is happy to support you in making contact with Principals in PSI schools.

Please do get in touch if you need anything further.

Kind regards

Áine

Áine Lynch
CEO



**

Please consider the Environment before printing this email

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National Parents Council Primary (Company limited by guarantee)

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Company Registration Number: **258148**

Charity Number: **Chy10547**

Registered Charity Number: **20027032**

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Appendix H: DCU Ethics Committee Approval letter

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26th February 2021

REC Reference: DCUREC/2021/030

Proposal Title: Exploring primary principals' perceptions and practices of partnership with particular reference to the PSI initiative

Applicant(s): Heidi Collins, Dr Maura Coulter, Dr Marie Flynn

Dear Colleagues,

This research proposal qualifies under our Notification Procedure, as a low risk social research project. Therefore, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this project.

Materials used to recruit participants should state that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Geraldine Scanlon'.

Dr Geraldine Scanlon
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee



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Appendix I: Reflective journal (excerpt)

- *16th April 2021 (After School ATP meeting)*

My own awareness of inequality in partnership. How to address that.

Nervousness about interviews and especially my inexperience as a researcher.

I need to focus on 'active listening'. Consider where I am now, my perspective (16th April) and wondering where I end up at the end of the process. Remember it's about 'stepping into the arena'.

- *19th April 2021*

Create a prioritised list of requirements for interview. MoSCoW as a prioritisation method is used to decide which requirements to complete first, which must come later and which to exclude. MoSCoW stands for must, should, could and would.

How will I do it? Re-listen to and watch Pilot and First interview. Make notes on how to eliminate poor interview habits such as rushing answers, finishing sentences and over use of nonverbal cues indicating agreement or 'correct answer' (Qu and Dumay, 2011, p. 248). Concept of semi structured interviews as conversation (Kvale, Denzin and Lincoln, Rubin and Rubin) required more discipline than previously anticipated so that it does not lapse into 'chat'.

Many of the active listening skills acquired through other roles such as mentor and work with employment interviews were brought into play. However, a challenge of interviewing peers and of insider research is to maintain the objectivity of the researcher.

- *Thursday 22nd April Pilot interview*

Qs about the pilot and also it was scheduled on a day when many issues arose in my work which needed my attention. I took a decision not to re-schedule and I will stick to that. I don't want to inconvenience participants with changes and I also need to stick to timeline. Although nervous, I realised that I am comfortable interviewing and relieved that the audio file was easily transcribed automatically.

Watch for interrupting and my personal opinion within the course of interview. There's a balance between warmth of interview and over familiar collegial chat. Many of these skills

are similar to the coaching training and experience I have had. On Zoom when you cross over chat it is off putting for the other person.

On reading the transcript I was sorry the participant was not part of the actual study sample. Confirmed many of the points made in literature review. Not enough on leadership style or qualities which optimize partnership.

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- *3rd May 2021*

Scheduling of participants within a purposive sample:

2 were secured through PSI network meeting.

2 were secured through colleague

2 were secured through local network

1 was secured by targeted email (The participant had spoken on PSI at a CPD event in DWEC in 2018.)

Use of Excel to ensure all admin is recorded. Life is busy.. write it DOWN.. and remember

Families are Unique

Schools are Unique

- *After IV1 Tuesday 11th May 2011*

PI - common purpose between schools and parents for children to flourish

Levels of involvement. Let parents know you are open to PI.

Partnership makes the relationship between schools and parents more Equal.

PA can fall into fundraising projects

Meaningful – vision for the school, everyone on same page

Barriers: culture ‘them and us’, unrealistic expectations, language, literacy skills

Facilitators; Creating a culture of welcome: Openness willingness to involve parents, ability to listen, managing parents expectations, trust. Forgot to ask about LEADERSHIP SKILLS!!! But participant speaks about ‘Best possible experience and best opportunity to be the best he/she can be.. don’t believe we can do that by ourselves, we need parents to back us up’

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- *After IV2 17th May 2021*

The time and willingness of these very senior people is very valuable. Don't waste it! Must eliminate researcher bias.

- *After IV3 21st May 2021*

Quote from Participant 'my leadership is about my absence' – John O'Donohoe poem – Prayer for a leader – not to put myself in the centre of things – linking salient points to something meaningful

- *Reflection before PGR2 – June 2021*

My background is in the area of school leadership and not in research. When it came to designing this qualitative study I was initially concerned that I may lack proper training to carry out formal research. Having engaged fully with all modules of the EdD, worked with the PSI programme, provided coaching with CSL for several years, however, along with the support of colleagues and my supervisors, I hoped that this lack of prior research experience would not pose a 'legitimate hindrance' to engaging in a qualitative project. Similarly to the observations of (DeWeese et al., 2021) my experiences as a participant in the PSI Programme had afforded me the opportunity to hear many stories from participants who shared their experiences of the PSI programme. I aimed to utilise my knowledge of and closeness to the programme to enable me to form research questions with the intention of looking deeply into the workings of the programme and the leadership elements which were most significant.

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- *August 2021*

The Methodology chapter cannot be written until the theoretical framework is fully understood and owned by the researcher. This ownership of an ontological and epistemological stance is the step up that is required for good research practice. In my experience to date, if a qualitative study is to be robust and stand up to the risks of bias, deep reflection, at an almost existential level, must be practiced throughout. In as much as we can own the stars, the 'constellation' referred to by Salomon 1991, of the four elements of reciprocal determinism must be fully absorbed, adopted and internalized as a necessary resource for the qualitative researcher.

Appendix J: PSI Template



JUMPING HURDLES



All Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) face challenges in developing programs of school, family, and community partnerships. ATPs work to solve challenges and improve activities to reach more families, strengthen community ties, and boost students' success.

- List **ONE EXCELLENT ACTIVITY** that your school presently conducts to **involve families or the community** in students' education at home, at school, or in the community.
- Identify **ONE CHALLENGE** or obstacle that your school faced in implementing this involvement activity.
- Briefly describe how your school **SOLVED** that challenge.
- Note one **NEXT STEP** that your school could take to make the activity **even more successful**.

ONE SUCCESSFUL FAMILY or COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITY

CHALLENGE

SOLUTION TO THE CHALLENGE

NEXT STEP to IMPROVE the activity EVEN MORE

Appendix K: PSI Template for planning and recording ATP projects

One Year Action Plan for Partnerships						
Schedule of school, family and community partnerships to reach schools goals						
On this 4-page plan, select 2 academic goals, 1 behavioural goal, and 1 goal for sustaining a partnership climate.						
For each Goal outline the desired results, how results will be measured, family and community involvement, activities, dates, responsibilities, and needed resources						
GOAL 1 - ACADEMIC: (Select 1 curricular Goal for children from the school improvement plan, such as improving reading, mathematics, writing, science, or other skills)						
GOAL 1 - Lead/s:						
Desired Results for this goal:			How will the school measure the result(s)?			
ORGANISE AND SCHEDULE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT THIS GOAL						
Activities 2+, continuing or new	Type (1 – 6)	Date of Activity	Class Levels	What specifically needs to be done now to achieve each activity, and when?	Persons in charge and supporting	What funds/supplies/resources are needed for this activity?

Appendix L: School Self-Evaluation Report: BOM legislative checklist (Primary)

Policy	Source	Has policy been approved by the board of management	If no, indicate aspects to be developed
Enrolment policy	Section (15)(2)(d) Education Act 1998	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Attendance and participation strategy ¹⁰	Section 22 Education Welfare Act 2000 Equal Status Acts 2000-2011	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Child Safeguarding Statement	Child Protection Procedures 2017 Circular 0081/2017	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Code of behaviour ¹¹ including anti-bullying policy Dignity in the Workplace Charter	Circular 20/90 <i>NEWB Guidelines</i> Section 23, Education Welfare Act 2000 <i>Anti-bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-primary schools</i> 2013, and Circular 45/13 Section 8(2)(b), Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Critical incident management plan	Responding to Critical Incidents: NEPS Guidelines and Resource Materials for Schools 2016	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Data protection	Data Protection Act 1988 Data Protection (Amendment Act) 2003	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Health and safety statement	Section 20 Health and Safety Act 2005	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Internet acceptable use policy	National Council for Technology in Education (NCTE) Guidelines, 2012 at www.webwise.ie	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Parents as partners	Circular 24/91	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Public service agreement – special needs assistants	Circular 71/11	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) policy	Relationships and Sexuality Education: Policy Guidelines (1997)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Substance use policy	National Drugs Strategy and Department of Education and Skills Guidelines	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Special educational needs policy ¹²	Education Act 1998 Equal Status Acts 2000- 2011 Education (Welfare) Act 2000 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) ¹³ 2004 Disability Act 2005 Circular RAM –SEN (2017)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
For DEIS schools only: DEIS Action Plan	DEIS Plan 2017 Department of Education and Skills Guidelines on the appropriate use of the DEIS Grant (updated annually)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Appendix M: ATP Projects relating to SSE

School	ATP Project	PSI Goal	SSE Area of Focus
Fiona (Cremore NS)	Oral Language Tip Sheet for parents	Academic	English/PLC
	Tables Tip Sheet for parents	Academic	Mathematics
	Intergenerational project	Academic/ Welcome	History, English, Dance, Music
	School Garden Project	Welcome	SESE Science and Geography
Orla (Penrose Way NS)	Citizenship Project	Behaviour	SPHE
	Shape and Space Dictionary	Academic	Mathematics
	Library Project	Academic	English
Tracey (Macintosh Park NS)	Mural in Reception	Welcome	/
	Outdoor Classroom	Welcome	SESE and SPHE
	Feelings Wallcharts	Welcome	SPHE
	Wildlife Garden	Academic Welcome	SESE
	1916 Centenary Project	Academic	History, English, Art
Martin (Ridgewood Senior NS)	Building Bridges parent info	Academic	English
	Anti-Bullying Policy	Welcome	SPHE & SSE Checklist of Legislative requirements
	Improvement of the playground and entrance/approaches to the building	Welcome	PE
Louise (Aidensfield ETNS)	Maths Videos	Academic	Mathematics
	Multilingual Signage	Welcome	SSE Checklist of Legislative requirements
	Homework Policy (relating to Child Safeguarding)	Welcome/ Academic	SSE Checklist of Legislative requirements
Stephen (Coastview Special School)	Parents as Partners Policy	Welcome	SSE Checklist of Legislative requirements
	Paint and Redecorate School Environment	Welcome	SPHE
Annemarie (Glasmene SNS)	SPHE wellbeing project	Welcome	SPHE
	SESE Geography trails	Academic	Geography
	Irish language project	Academic	Primary Language Curriculum

Appendix N. Six Step Process of School Self Evaluation

SSE steps

The diagram below sets out a six-step SSE process which has been used by schools since the introduction of SSE in the Irish school system. A school can use this framework flexibly in light of its particular context-specific and/or national SSE focus. For example, schools may move quickly through the earlier steps of the process or find that one step rolls naturally into the next. Such an approach is entirely in keeping with the idea of SSE being a collaborative way of working to identify strengths, to plan and implement actions for improvement, and to monitor the effectiveness of those actions in terms of their impact on learning and teaching and the experiences of pupils/students, including their wellbeing.



(Department of Education, 2022b)

Appendix O. Key findings per setting and the similarities/ differences in how the initiative was implemented in each setting

School	Key findings regarding Motivation for involvement	Key findings regarding Enactment of PSI Meetings	Key Findings regarding perceptions of PI	Key Findings regarding Leadership implications of PI and Partnership	Key findings regarding Enactment of PSI Projects
Cremore NS	<p>Enhance school reputation</p> <p>Meet contextual needs in increasingly diverse local demographic</p>	<p>Set up and selected ATP members</p> <p>Staff member co-ordinated</p> <p>Relinquished leadership role to grow leadership capacity</p> <p>Maintained monitoring role</p>	<p>Normative view of PI as good for all</p> <p>Parents' Association can be over limited by focus on fundraising</p>	<p>Approachable leadership style evident in 'open door' policy</p> <p>Knowledge of SSE requirement and efficiency of PSI to support the process</p>	<p>Based on School Self Evaluation area of focus</p> <p>Combination of Academic and Welcome goals</p> <p>Cross-curricular integration</p>
Macintosh Park NS	<p>Boost school reputation in local community</p>	<p>Set up and selected ATP members</p> <p>Staff member co-ordinated</p> <p>Relinquished leadership role to grow leadership capacity</p> <p>Maintained monitoring role</p>	<p>PI founded in parents support of child's learning e.g. homework, support for literacy</p> <p>Value for parents' skillsets</p>	<p>Knowledge of SSE requirement and efficiency of PSI to support the process</p> <p>Managing initiative overload at whole school level is important</p>	<p>Based on School Self Evaluation area of focus</p> <p>Combination of Academic and Welcome goals</p> <p>Cross-curricular integration</p>
Ridgewood SNS	<p>Establish identity for a newly set up large urban school</p>	<p>Set up and selected ATP members</p> <p>Staff member co-ordinated</p> <p>Relinquished leadership role to grow</p>	<p>Parents' Association can be over limited by focus on fundraising</p>	<p>Approachable leadership style evident in 'leading by walking around'</p> <p>Knowledge of SSE</p>	<p>Based on School Self Evaluation area of focus</p> <p>Combination of Academic and Welcome goals</p>

		leadership capacity Maintained monitoring role	Value for parents' skillsets	requirement and efficiency of PSI to support the process Knowledge of LAOS 2022 suitability of PSI to support the process	Cross-curricular integration
Coastview Special School	Create a sense of connection between families and school in a Special Education context Foster positive rapport in school community	Set up and selected ATP members Staff member co-ordinated Relinquished leadership role to grow leadership capacity Maintained monitoring role	Without positive PI children's placement in special school can be at risk	Approachable leadership style evident, communicates in consistent and positive manner Knowledge of SSE requirement and efficiency of PSI to support the process Focus on inclusion	Based on School Self Evaluation area of focus Combination of Academic and Welcome goals Cross-curricular integration
Aidensfield NS	Establish identity for a newly set up large urban DEIS school, catering to cultural diversity and transient school population Foster mutual understanding	Set up and selected ATP members Staff member co-ordinated Relinquished leadership role to grow leadership capacity Maintained monitoring role	Parents' Association can be over limited by focus on fundraising	Knowledge of SSE requirement and efficiency of PSI to support the process Focus on inclusion	Based on School Self Evaluation area of focus Combination of Academic and Welcome goals Cross-curricular integration
Penrose Way NS	Improve PI and repair school reputation based on historical legacy in the community	Set up and selected ATP members Staff member co-ordinated Relinquished leadership role to grow leadership capacity Maintained monitoring role	The importance of home-based PI PI holistically good for children Focus on 'full potential' of the child	Approachable leadership style evident in 'leading by walking around' Knowledge of SSE requirement and efficiency of PSI to	Based on School Self Evaluation area of focus Combination of Academic and Welcome goals Cross-curricular integration

				support the process Knowledge of LAOS 2022 suitability of PSI to support the process	
Glasmene SNS	Broaden range of PI to provide alternative to PA Utilise parent and local expertise to support school improvement	Set up and selected ATP members Relinquished leadership role to grow leadership capacity Delegated monitoring role	PI is critical to the smooth running of the school based on parents support of learning and of school-based PI Value for parents' skillsets	Knowledge of SSE requirement and efficiency of PSI to support the process PSI provides authentic partnership	Based on School Self Evaluation area of focus Combination of Academic and Welcome goals Cross-curricular integration