Policies and practices of parental involvement and parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education: a critical discourse analysis.

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This thesis is submitted to University College Dublin in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract and summary

Policies and practices of parental involvement and parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education: a critical discourse analysis.

This thesis presents a critical discourse analysis of policies of parental involvement in Irish education from the past decade. It explores three questions: Do discourses of parental involvement and teacher professionalism construct parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education?; What implications do these constructions have for policies and practices of parent-teacher relationships, particularly parent-teacher partnerships, in Irish primary education?; How can these constructions be challenged and/or supported (as appropriate) to enhance parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish primary education? The research is framed theoretically by the contention that discourse has the power to determine what is perceived as being true, acceptable and appropriate in various situations.

International and Irish literature reviewed during the research identified traditional, managerial and democratic discourses of teacher professionalism as exerting an influence on the development of parent-teacher relations in Irish education. A critical policy discourse analysis approach was used to explore the research questions at three levels: the individual school level, the systemic/national level and the supra-national level. The Foucauldian-based, document-focussed discourse analysis was augmented by thematic analysis of elite interviews with key policy actors in Irish education. The research findings revealed that discourses of parent-teacher relations are constructed differently at various levels of the education system. While there was evidence of much inter-discursivity at each level, traditional discourses were found to be resilient at school levels, whereas democratic discourses were more apparent at national/systemic levels. Managerial discourses were most readily identified at supra-national levels, but significantly, their influence was found to be increasing at national/systemic levels also. An analysis of the discursive plane of parent teacher relations provides useful insights into how democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations are legitimated in Irish education. Irish teachers were found to be well-placed to promote and engage with democratic parent-teacher partnerships, and such partnerships have the potential to advance activist forms of teacher professionalism. This rather optimistic analysis is, however, tempered by observations from the research that democratic discourses of parental involvement are currently being systematically recontextualised to advance managerial objectives in Irish education. The potential of this as a policy lever makes parental involvement a topic of extreme importance in Ireland. Teachers must counter and ‘re-recontextualise’ parent-teacher relations to protect Irish education and primary teacher professionalism from the excesses and dogma of new managerialism so dominant internationally. This research suggests that teacher action with regard to parental involvement is a matter of urgent importance for Irish education.
Statement of Original Authorship

I hereby certify that the submitted work is my own work, was completed while registered as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and I have not obtained a degree elsewhere on the basis of the research presented in this submitted work.

____________________________
Brigid Bennett

____________________________
Date
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<td>Board of Management</td>
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<td>c.</td>
<td>circa</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
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<td>CDS</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Studies</td>
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<td>DA</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
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<td>Dem</td>
<td>Democratic discourses of parent teacher relations</td>
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<td>DEIS</td>
<td>Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools initiative</td>
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<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education</td>
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<td>DHA</td>
<td>Discourse Historical Approach</td>
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<td>EACEA</td>
<td>Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency</td>
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<td>ECB</td>
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<td>ETB</td>
<td>Education and Training Boards</td>
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<td>European Union</td>
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<td>GAA</td>
<td>Gaelic Athletic Association</td>
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<td>HSCL</td>
<td>Home School Community Liaison</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>INTO</td>
<td>Irish National Teachers’ Organisation</td>
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<td>IPPN</td>
<td>Irish Primary Principals’ Network</td>
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<td>Man</td>
<td>Managerial discourses of parent teacher relations</td>
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<td>NCCA</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment</td>
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<td>NPC-P</td>
<td>National Parents’ Council – Primary</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>Parents’ Association</td>
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<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
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1. Introduction

1.1 The research topic and research purpose

This study explores the constructive power of discourse in education through examining parental involvement and parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education. Particular attention is paid to how discourses of teacher professionalism serve to construct understandings of ‘good’ parent-teacher relations/parental involvement in schools. The study involves an identification of the persuasive policies relating to parent-teacher relations in Irish education and an interrogation of what is implied and assumed in these policies, to better understand how various discourses are reflected in and shape policies and practices of parental involvement in Irish education. Discourse is considered in both agency and institutional terms. The research is structured in relation to parental involvement in schools/education at individual, school and systemic levels. It draws on a wide variety of discursive sources, including policy documents from parent, teacher, management organisations, the Department of Education (DES) and international organisations, as well as accounts from key policy insiders in Irish education.

The overall purpose of this research relates to gaining a greater understanding of the discursive construction of parent-teacher relations in Irish education, so that those relationships might be improved in the future. The case of parent-teacher relations is used to gain insight into processes of discursive construction in Irish education more generally but this is only of secondary concern – the core of the work centres on identifying and exploring, qualitatively, the roles of agents and institutions that have contributed over the past twenty years to constructing these discourses around parents and their roles in relation to the primary education of their children in Ireland. The research proceeds from a strong belief that there are holistic benefits to be gained for pupils, parents, teachers and society more broadly from positive parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in schools, and can be seen to be interpellated by democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations (see Section 5.5). The potential effects of such positionality and researcher subjectivity are considered at length in Sections 3.3.5.3 and 3.4.5.2, but it seems appropriate to clarify this position from the outset.

In order to advance the purposes of the research, this exploration of the constructive power of discourse in education was positioned within three specific research strands: the characteristics of discourses of parental involvement and teacher professionalism and the construction of parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education; the implications any such constructions could have for policies and practices of parent-teacher relationships, particularly parent-teacher partnerships, in Irish primary education; and the policy processes and arenas through which these constructions might be mitigated in order to enhance parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish primary education. These are considered in depth in Chapter 2 and subsequently explicated as defining research questions for the work (See Section 2.6.3.2).
This introductory chapter discusses why the study is necessary and justified, and why it is timely. An introductory outline of the chapters of the thesis is also provided.

1.2 Justification of research interest – why research this topic?

The use of parent-teacher relations (and the influence of constructions of teacher professionalism on them) as the case through which to explore the issue of discourses of parental involvement in Irish education policy and practice is valuable on a number of grounds. For instance, there is a serious lack of previous studies of this nature, especially studies that acknowledge the central role of teachers in parent-teacher relations, given that much research on parental involvement scrutinises only the role and action of the parent. The school effectiveness debate and the recognition of the importance of holistic education demand that the issue of parental involvement be to the fore in educational research. Changes in communication technologies and working habits in contemporary society have affected parent-teacher relations, and this adds to the research worthiness of the topic at the present time. Furthermore, the wider implications of what is deemed appropriate parental involvement in terms of citizenship and community in modern society means that research in this area has relevance beyond educational spheres.

Over the past forty years, parental involvement has become an increasingly important topic in education and educational research, as evidenced by Castelli and Pepe’s (2008:8) finding that for every article written about parental involvement in 1966, thirty-five were written in 2007. They also noted a ‘consolidation of the research field’ around the concept of parental involvement in recent years. Informative and helpful as the existing literature is, it seems possible to gain further insights and understandings into parent-teacher relations by examining the relationships between policy and practice, and between official voice and lived realities, more closely. Much of the existing research has been concerned with the involvement of parents in the education of their own children (especially with regard to literacy and numeracy, cf. inter alia Topping 1992; Greenhough & Hughes 1998; Warren & Young 2002; Margrain 2010), or in exploring the oft-cited ‘barriers to parental involvement’ (cf. inter alia Miretzky 2004; Ratcliff & Hunt 2009; Sohn & Wang 2006). Therefore, the envisaged critical reading of Irish policies, strategies and guidelines in relation to parental involvement should provide a fresh angle for researching parent-teacher relationships. Issues relating to class, gender, race and education (cf. inter alia Blackmore 2010; Reay 1995; Bryan 2010; Gillborn 203) have been looked at through a critical lens by educational researchers but while some of this has touched on parent-teacher relations, they have not been to the fore in critical studies. Thus, there is an opportunity to do something different in this regard, certainly in the Irish context.

‘The belief in the central importance of teacher’, has been identified by Larsen (2010:214) as a common feature of educational research, policies and reform strategies. Despite the frequency of this teacher centric approach, however, a thorough review of the literature of parental involvement has found little discussion of how notions of teacher professionalism shape parental involvement in
schools. Among the few exceptions to this, the work of Baeck (2010), Miretzky (2004) and Hartas (2008) did attend to possible associations between parental involvement and teacher professionalism. The requirement for further research in this area can be interpreted from Hartas’ (2008:139) comment that increasing emphasis on teacher accountability and teacher professionalism continues ‘to shape parent-professional collaborative workings in ways that are not always easily understood’. Given the position of teachers in the schools in which parents are expected to become involved, it is likely that discourses of teaching and teachers, rather than those of parenting or parents are dominant, and as such play a major role in defining parent-teacher relations. Understandings of what it is to be a ‘good’ teacher are likely to affect teachers’ perspectives, attitudes, role construction and sense of responsibility to parents. Teacher behaviours arising from these understandings directly impact on the development of parental involvement in schools (cf. Baeck 2010:323; Miretzky 2004:821; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris 1997:539). Also, public consciousness of what a ‘good’ teacher is and does, will impact on perceptions of parental involvement required in schools, and on understandings of what a ‘good parent’ is, needs to do, and is permitted to do, in relation to schools and teachers (Harris & Goodall 2008:280). Parental role construction has been identified as being crucial for their involvement in schools (cf. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1997:32), and so exploring the effects of teacher role constructions appears worthwhile. It is anticipated that this approach will not reinforce the school-centric nature that the parental involvement debate has previously been criticised for, (cf. Lawson 2003). Rather it will assist in the ‘decentring’ of the issue of parental involvement away from notions of uncooperative parents, as Brien and Stelmach (2009:6; also Pérez Carreón 2005:471) have suggested is necessary. It centres the possibility that constructions of teacher professionalism have resulted in uncooperative teachers from a parent’s point of view, thereby taking a more parent-centric approach to parent-teacher relations. The historical exclusion of parents from Irish schools (as outlined in Section 1.3) and the relatively high status of teaching in Ireland makes this aspect of the research particularly pertinent in the Irish context.

The on-going legislative and research interest into parental involvement in Ireland and internationally is inspired in many instances by a belief in the importance of parental involvement for school effectiveness, and the possibilities parents might offer in relation to school improvement. Many researchers have listed parental involvement as a feature of an effective school, and an improved school climate as a benefit of greater parental involvement (cf. inter alia Levine & Lezotte 1990, Henderson & Mapp 2002, both cited by Giles 2006: 257; Hornby 2000, Hanafin & Lynch 2002:35). The precise ways in which parental involvement are seen to enhance school effectiveness/ improvement vary depending on political ideologies and school circumstances. Some researchers (cf. Edwards & Warin 1999:327) have expressed caution as to the actual contribution of parents to school improvement, but regardless, the potential benefits of good parent-teacher relations are usually not disputed, particularly in relation to reducing educational disadvantage and promoting societal equality. This interest in parental involvement as a means to improve schools has implications for perceptions
regarding the professionalism and trustworthiness of teachers, as well as providing a rationale for the further exploration of issues relating to parent-teacher relations.

Holistic approaches to education require the involvement of parents, given that such approaches accept that ‘we are inextricably inter-connected’ (Bauch 2001:213 citing Orr 1992), and therefore that strict separations between the home and school life of the child are unnatural. Ball (1998:122, citing Carter & O’Neill 1995), in describing ‘the new orthodoxy’ of educational reform, listed ‘increasing community input in schools’ as one of its five main elements. This requires that schools should be rooted in their local communities, and that they move ‘from isolated entities to integral elements of collaborative learning communities’ (Warren, Young & Hanifin 2003:63), which necessarily involves parents. The practical benefits that can accrue from schools and families working together to address children’s problems are also a motivating factor for good parent-teacher relations (Bojuwoye 2009:462). In the Irish context, the ‘child-centred’ nature of the 1999 Revised Curriculum has implications for the co-operation of parents and teachers to ensure that this principle is upheld, as well as for the positioning of parent-teacher relations on educational research agendas.

Parent-teacher relations are a particular concern of contemporary educationalists as recent societal changes have altered, or at least have the potential to alter, relationships between parents and teachers; hence, making issues of parental involvement all the more relevant. Hargreaves (2000:172) listed the emergence of commuter towns, two-income families, changing family type and multiculturalism, as factors hindering the development of informal relationships between parents and teachers, since it is difficult to cultivate and sustain rapport if parents and teachers rarely meet, if neither have time for casual chats, or if there are language or cultural barriers. While Hargreaves’ research was Canadian-based, it is likely these points would apply comparably to Ireland. Hargreaves (2000:172) also discussed how recent developments in communication technologies have affected relationships between parents and teachers. In the years since, advances such as mobile phones, emails and social media have made this point all the more relevant. There are now greater opportunities than ever for parents and teachers to be in frequent contact, but this poses challenges for schools as to how to utilise these technologies most effectively. Greater access to communication arguably increases the risk of conflict between teachers and parents, especially in the absence of good underlying personal relationships (Keller 2008). Furthermore, the internet has had an impact on how the purposes and objectives of schooling are regarded, and on attitudes to teachers, as schools and teachers can no longer have a monopoly on learning or wisdom in a community. Modern society is conscious more than ever of the lasting effects of childhood, as reactions in Ireland to publications such as the Ryan Report (2009) demonstrate. Smaller family sizes, greater comparative wealth, and easier access to information, may also have contributed to a realisation that the education of children is too important for parents to hand over with blind trust to particular individuals or institutions. The increased awareness of the need to accommodate special educational needs has implications too for the value placed on parent-teacher relationships (Martin & Hagan-Burke 2002). From the school’s
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perspective, the greater focus on holistic education, integration, and linkage highlights the importance of connections between home and school in children’s lives. As children’s experiences are increasingly recognised as important, so too are the relationships between those most involved in their lives.

Education policy and change have implications that reach far beyond schools and schooling. Relations between parents and schools can ‘be conceived of as an exemplar of relationships between citizens and welfare state institutions’, and as such contribute to understandings of citizenship and community (Vincent 1997:272). The ‘extremely and necessarily political matters’, relating to what is defined as ‘good’ by society, (Farrell 1998:2) that surround all education policy and change, apply particularly to issues of parental involvement and parent-teacher relations. Different understandings of the roles and responsibilities of parents in relation to the education system and the schools their children attend imply different understandings of citizenship and democracy (cf. Ranson, Martin, McKeown & Arnott 2003; Birenbaum-Carmelli 1999; Edwards & Alldred 2000; Vincent & Martin 2002:110). It is likely that approaches to parental involvement and, indeed, teacher professionalism differ depending on what the main objectives of education and schooling are deemed to be – whether priority is placed on economic efficiency or social justice, for instance. Attitudes to parental involvement are also affected by perspectives on whether education is a private concern of the family or a public concern of the state. Arguably a society’s attitude to inclusion and equality is demonstrated by the place of all parents in its schools. While perspectives on parenting, teaching and schooling are likely to differ depending on social and cultural contexts, the potential of educational policy to affect society more generally cannot be discounted, regardless of policy specifics (Rawolle & Lingard 2008:733). Hence, research into parental involvement and teacher relations has relevance beyond the school or educational sphere.

1.3 Justification of research interest – why research this topic now?

The international interest in legislating for parental involvement over the past two decades and the changing attitude to parents in Irish education evident over the same timeframe, as well as the likelihood that parental involvement will become a much more important element in Irish education in the near future, make this a particularly opportune time for examining parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish education.

1.3.1 International context

Increasing international research interest in parental involvement in schools has coincided with developments in relation to the legal roles and responsibilities of parents in schools in many countries around the world. This concern with the role of parents in schools tends to be traced back to the publication of the Coleman Report in the United States in 1966, and the Plowden Report in the United Kingdom in 1967 (cf. Hung & Marjoribanks 2005:3). Hodge & Runswick-Cole (2008:638)
identified the Warnock Report of 1978 in the United Kingdom as the source of interest in parent-teacher partnership specifically. It has, however, been during the past two decades that legislation affecting parental involvement in schools has been introduced extensively internationally. In the United States, legislation such as Goals 2000: Educate America Act 1994 and No Child Left Behind 2001, as well as reforms resulting in greater site-based management, have prioritised the role of parents in education. Likewise, in England, legislation such as the Education Act 1988, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the emergence of initiatives such as Education Action Zones (cf. Simpson & Cieslik 2002), The Children’s Plan, (cf. Harris & Goodall 2008) and the appointment of ‘Parent Support Advisors’ from 2005 onwards (cf. Cullen, Cullen & Lindsay 2013) have placed parental involvement ‘at the epicentre of policy’ (Harris & Goodall 2008:278; also McKay & Garrett 2013:734). There is much evidence that encouraging a greater role for parents in school decision-making is widespread in diverse contexts around the world (e.g. inter alia Israel, Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv 2008; South Africa, Heystek 2006; Bojuwoye 2009; Belgium, Dom & Verhoeven 2006; Hong Kong, Lam 2006). In recent decades attention has been paid to parental involvement in Ireland as well by academic researchers, (cf. inter alia Lysaght 1993; Hanafin & Lynch 2002; MacGiollaPhádraig 2003a/2003b/2005; Galvin, Higgins & Mahony 2009; MacRuairc 2011), although arguably less emphasis has been placed on it than, for instance, in the United Kingdom or the United States, and it is only quite recently that it has become a topic of interest, as outlined below. That parent-teacher relations are an issue garnering such international attention indicates their potential importance for education systems and schools, as well as providing an example of policy-borrowing and ‘global policymaking’ in action (cf. Ball 2008:1). As Dusi (2012:13) noted, however, parent-teacher relationships ‘represent an unresolved issue’ across Europe and elsewhere, and so offer possibilities for further educational research.

1.3.2 Context and history of Irish education policy with regard to parental involvement in schools

The history of parent involvement in the education of their children in Ireland has always been complex. It has at times been opposed to the law, as for instance during Penal times in sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland when the prohibition on education for Catholics necessitated that Irish Catholic parents take a direct role in arranging educational provision for their children. This was achieved through the illegal and secret hedge school system, and through smuggling children abroad to continental Europe to access higher education (cf. Raftery 2009). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully explore how this direct form of parental involvement in education was eroded by the establishment of the National School system (State provided education) in 1831, it seems likely that the distancing of parents from involvement in schooling experienced in other countries as education systems became regularised and professionalised (see Section 2.2.2.1) was also experienced in Ireland. Raftery (2009: 15) noted how diocesan priests were heavily involved in the
hedge and parish schooling system even before Catholic Emancipation in 1829, and MacRuairc (2011:4) outlined how the 1831 system ultimately gave clergymen (whether Catholic or Protestant) complete control of the schools, although this was contrary to the original non-denominational aspirations of the National Board of Commissioners of National Education. Parents’ voices were, according to Coolahan (1981) and O’Buachalla (1988, both cited by MacRuairc 2011:3) ‘marginalised and rendered silent’ in this battle between Church and State for control over education.

Parental exclusion from education continued in the Church dominated education system of the Irish Free State/Irish Republic, despite the acknowledgement in Bunreacht na hÉireann (Government of Ireland 1937), of the family as the ‘primary and natural educator of the child’. The Constitution also provided parents with the freedom to choose a particular type of education for their children. However, as Byrne and Smith (2010:4), citing Coolahan 2000) noted, neither Church nor State made much efforts to include parents in policy-making, consultation or administration of schooling throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

The 1960s, according to Byrne and Smith (2010:4) saw the emergence of some greater interest in and tolerance of parental input into education. This culminated in the achievement of parent representation on school Boards of Management in 1975. However, this significant achievement (the first major change in primary school governance arrangements since 1831), and the fact that those management structures make issues relating to site-based management (where much attention relating to parental involvement has been focused internationally, cf. Ball 1998:122) less relevant to the Irish education system, may have supported a perception that parental involvement had been ‘solved’ for Irish education. Thus, the international debate arising in the 1970s about the place of parents in schooling was not seen as being particularly relevant to Ireland. The resistance experienced by the emerging Educate Together movement from the late 1970s onwards, and their sense that parental involvement in education was not taken seriously by the Department of Education and the Church bodies, lends credence to this argument (Educate Together, 2012), albeit that the more positive experience of the gaelscoil movement suggests that religion and ethos were controversial rather than parental involvement per se. Some echoes of the Plowden Report may be identified in the 1971 Curriculum; for instance, in its child centred nature and in the recommendations relating to individual and group work. Also this curriculum recognised the importance of the ‘combined efforts of his [sic] home, his Church and his school to see that his all-round growth is healthy and harmonious’ (DES 1971:12). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that parental involvement (at least outside of limited participation in formal structures) was not of great concern in Irish education until at least the late 1980s (cf. MacRuairc 2011). Therefore, it remains a topic on which further research is justified.

From the mid to late 1980s onwards, however, the interaction of a number of factors caused parental involvement to become too important a topic to be set aside any longer in Ireland. These factors included the waning influence of the Catholic Church, an increasingly directive approach to educational management from the DES and greater parental demands for broader forms of school
provision, particularly regarding Special Educational Needs and religious instruction. That parents in the 1980s were the first generation to have benefitted from free secondary education, and the impact of the recession in the 1980s on educational funding were also important in mobilising parental voice.

The mobilisation of parent voice may also have been aided by the emergence of a ‘new’ model of policy-making in Ireland which seeks to construct the parent in the as client or consumer in a more market-based understanding of education and education provision (cf. Galvin 2009:272). Harris (1989:7, also Drudy 2009:3) described how educational policy-making in Ireland is the prerogative of the Minister for Education, assisted and advised by his/her Department, approved by the cabinet and answerable to Dáil Éireann. However, in Ireland, as in other modern democratic societies, policy-making is a much more complicated process than the ministerial prerogative implies (cf. Galvin 2009). As well as involving, in Bowe, Ball with Gold’s (1992) terms, the Context of Policy Text Production, Irish educational policy-making also involves the Contexts of Influence and Contexts of Practice (see Section 2.6.2). Hence, Drudy (2009:3) listed the middle and upper classes, the Churches, employer’s representative groups, the teacher unions, the educational management bodies and parent bodies as influential within the Irish policy-making sphere. She also noted the influence of international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU). Drudy (2009:3) noted how the wide range of groups with an interest in education in Ireland became particularly apparent in the early 1990s during the National Education Convention which preceded the publication of Charting our Education Future, White Paper on Education (1995). The complex nature of Irish educational policy-making can be inferred from the dearth of written policies on parent-teacher relations (and many other topics) from official or legal perspectives (e.g. Government or Department of Education sources) that is noticeable in the Irish context, albeit that work on a Parents’ Charter is reported to be on-going at present. Indeed Galvin (2009:277) noted the passivity and uncertainty of the Department of Education with regard to driving or generating policy-led change historically. This allows other organisations (such as the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation/INTO, National Parents’ Association/NPC-P, Irish Primary Principals’ Network/IPPN etc.) to be identified as policy-text producers. The presence of teachers’ and parents’ representative bodies within the policy-making sphere of Irish education at the present time justifies the focus of the current research.

The positioning of parents as important influencers of policy can be inferred from a number of developments over the past thirty years that indicate the changing approach to parental involvement in education (cf. Eivers & Creaven 2013:105). These include the establishment of the National Parents’ Council by the Minister for Education in 1985 (INTO 1997:6), the founding of An Foras Pátrúnachta in 1993, and the eventual, if gradual, acceptance of the Educate Together movement. The recommendations in relation to ‘parents as partners’ in the Report of the Primary Education Review Body (Government of Ireland 1990:39-41), the usage of the term ‘partnership with parents’ in Circular 24/91 (DES 1991), the proposals relating to parental involvement in Education for a Changing World
(Government of Ireland 1992:155), the subsequent involvement of parent representatives in the *National Education Convention* in 1993 (Coolahan 1994), and the recommendations included in *Charting our Education Future* (Government of Ireland 1995:139-140), signalled an interest in parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in schools in a broader form than had previously been envisaged.

This progression culminated in the provisions relating to parents in the *1998 Education Act*, which is the authoritative source of Department of Education policy at present. Section 14 of the Act obliges school patrons to ensure that Boards of Management are properly constituted and that schools are managed in ‘a spirit of partnership’ - the precise nature of this spirit is, admittedly, glossed over. Arguably, this is down to the difficulty of securing agreement on the precise nature and mechanisms of any such ‘partnership’. However, some aspects of ‘partnership’ are specified in the Act, and Section 26 declares the right of parents to establish a Parents’ Association, to act in the interests of the students in co-operation with other stakeholders and to have the Principal/Board of Management regard their advice. The requirement that the Minister for Education and local Boards of Management consult with parents recurs throughout the Act. In primary schools, from the introduction of the *Revised Primary Curriculum* (DES/ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 1999) parents are to be included in the school planning process at each subject level. Irish schools and teachers are now compelled, therefore, to have regard for the role of parents in the schools which their children attend. Indeed, it is notable that in 2002 the *Kellaghan Report* listed involvement with parents and communities as being among the ten greatest challenges facing Irish teaching and teachers. Given the widening of the role of parents in Irish schools over the past two decades, it is an opportune time to examine parental involvement and parent-teacher relations.

Furthermore, parental involvement in Irish education is likely to become more important in the years to come, as school management structures (especially at primary level) change in response to the decline in power and personnel of the Catholic Church. While these changes have been heralded for a number of years, the debate arising from the publication of the *Murphy Report* (2009) and the *Ryan Report* (2009), and Minister Quinn’s establishment of the ‘Forum on Patronage and Pluralism within the Primary Sector’ (28/03/2011), is likely to have hastened the process. As *Educate Together* examines the possibilities of patronage at second level, and the Education and Training Boards (ETB) move into primary level provision, further questions will be posed as to the role of parents in school management. The reduced trust of the public in major organisations as a result of the banking and economic crisis of September 2008 may affect the public appetite for educational control, and encourage parental demands for more influence in decisions that affect their children. The recent publications of Bleach’s (2010) *Parental Involvement in Primary Education in Ireland*, and Byrne and Smyth’s (2010) *Behind the Scenes? A Study of Parental Involvement in Post-Primary Education*, indicate that the relevance of parent-teacher relations is now being acknowledged in Irish education. Hence, it is a defensible research topic. With regard to the present research, the greater attention being
paid to parental involvement and the higher awareness of it as a topic of concern is likely to be advantageous with the policy documents, discussion papers and guidelines produced by a variety of sources in recent years allowing for documentary analysis in a way that was not possible in the past.

Due to the relevance of parental involvement to contemporary teaching and schools, evidence of its importance in school effectiveness, and the implications of parent-teacher relations for schooling and society, policy-makers internationally and in Ireland are and have been concerned with the issue of parental involvement and parent-teacher relations in schools. Since ‘educational policies structure educational practice in certain directions, by different kinds of organisational, ideological or economic steering systems’ (Ball 2003, cited by Lund 2008:637; also Nakagawa 2000:445), it appears useful to further explore the association between discourses, policies and practices of parental involvement and teacher professionalism in the Irish primary education system, to illuminate the aspirations, assumptions and implications that attach to parent-teacher relationships.

1.4 Thesis outline

The work underpinning this thesis centres on exploring how parental involvement in Irish education is discursively constructed, particularly with regard to how understandings of teacher professionalism impact on parent-teacher relations, and how these discourses are represented in and shape policies of parental involvement in Irish education at school, national and supra-national level.

The study proceeds through a review of the existing literature in order to clarify the relevant concepts, to identify what other explorations of the topic have revealed and to ascertain what knowledge gaps remain that this study could productively address. The methodological considerations of the study are discussed in the third chapter, with an outline and justification of the research approach (involving discourse analysis and elite interviewing) provided. The findings from the documentary discourse analysis, supplemented by the data from the interviews, are presented in the fourth chapter. These findings are discussed further in relation to developing better conceptual clarity and research coherence in the fifth chapter. This is done in order to explore how they might address the knowledge gaps identified from the literature review. The most salient points of learning arising from this discussion are further considered and summarised in the sixth chapter. This adds depth to the research process by taking an overtly agentive and institutional view of discourse, its activities and its effects. The thesis closes with a discussion of the lessons learned from using discourse theory to explore issues of parent-teacher relations in Irish education. A comprehensive list of references and relevant appendices are provided at the end of the thesis.
2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Introduction to chapter

This extended chapter reviews the existing literature of parental involvement/parent-teacher relations, clarifying the relevant concepts and identifying what previous research has revealed, thereby allowing the refinement of the research questions for the present study. It is prefaced by a brief introductory discussion of the concepts of parental involvement and teacher professionalism, as these are important for anchoring understanding as the thesis progresses. The chapter comprises of four main sections. These discuss traditional, managerial and democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations in turn, as well as detailing the theoretical framework that underpins the research. It concludes with an outline of the analytical framework of the study.

2.1.1 Definition of parental involvement

Parental involvement in schools is a concept that is poorly defined, and within which a wide range of behaviours, actions and initiatives have been included. This lack of a ‘clear operational definition’ (Fan & Williams 2009:55) has undoubtedly added to the complexity surrounding the topic. As Tveit (2009:291) noted, ‘a concept is not only indicative of the relations it covers; it is also a factor within them. Thus, descriptions of parental involvement impact how the phenomenon of parent involvement develops’. While it is not necessary to provide a comprehensive account of the definition debate at this stage, some of the aspects to which parental involvement may refer are outlined below.

Epstein’s (1995) famous typology of parental involvement is much cited in the literature (cf. inter alia Bridgemohan, Van Wyk & Van Staden 2005; Stelmach 2005; Giles 2006). It categorises parental involvement according to six types or stages: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision-making, and Collaborating with the community. While this is useful if examining particular aspects of parental involvement in education in isolation, it is somewhat overly specific when exploring the topic in a global sense. Giles (2006:258) provided a simplified version of this model when she specified three types of parental involvement: Involvement (attending parent nights, etc.), Engagement (volunteering in classrooms – higher involvement), and Empowerment (committees, decision-making, governance), and the over-arching category of parent ownership. Grolnick and Slowiaczek’s (1994; also Grolnick et al. 1997:538) distinction between ‘School involvement,’ (parental participation in activities at school and at home), ‘Cognitive intellectual involvement’ (parental co-ordination and participation in educational activities with their child), and ‘Personal involvement’ (awareness of what is going on with their child at school), takes a similar line. More simply, Smit, Driessen, Sluiter and Sleegers (2007:46) used the terms Participation (in school) and Involvement (at home) to differentiate between school-based and home-based activities, and a similar approach was taken by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997). Smit et al. distinguished between ‘Spontaneous’ (bottom-up, generally non-institutional) and ‘Planned’ (top-down,
institutional) parental involvement/participation, as did Desforges (2003) in his comprehensive review of the literature of parental involvement. All of these models indicate the wide ranging nature of parental involvement, and the myriad of activities it can encompass. However, the confused nature of the terminology surrounding parental involvement is demonstrated by the lack of consistency in differentiating between terms such as ‘involvement’, ‘engagement’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’ (examples of other uses found in inter alia Pérez Carreón & Calabrese Barton 2005; Sheldon 2002; Theodorou 2007:91).

In light of the above confusion around the concept of ‘parental involvement’ it is perhaps unsurprising that some scholars have rejected this terminology completely. For instance, Epstein (2013) described ‘parent involvement’ as a ‘bad word’, using the terminology of ‘School, Family and Community Partnerships’ instead. She argued that this shifts the focus from parent behaviours, to that of all members of the wider school community, and places more emphasis on the beneficial consequences for students arising from partnership behaviours. Despite appreciating the logic of her argument, the term ‘parental involvement’ is retained in this study, because it allows a consideration of activities involving parents in schools that may not fit into understandings of genuine partnership, but are, nonetheless, relevant when considering the different discursive influences on parent-teacher relations in Irish schools. Furthermore, in Ireland ‘parental involvement’ is the term used most frequently to refer to the school associated parental behaviours that are the focus of this paper.

Arising from the discursive focus of the present research, and the limitations inherent in rigid categorisations, it appears Giles’ (2006:258) general description of parental involvement as ‘a comprehensive set of multilevel and concurrent activities that seek the broad participation of parents in the life and work of schools’, is most useful for the purposes of this study, as it allows for a broader, more holistic consideration of the topic of parent-teacher relations than does Epstein’s model. The term parental involvement is assumed to relate chiefly to parental involvement in schools, (parent-teacher relations) both educationally with regard to their own children, and also in whole-school decision-making. This is not to deny the important contribution of parents to a child’s education through activities at home and that may not be visible from the school perspective (cf. O’Brien 2005). It does, however, centre the importance of parent-teacher relations for education and schools.

2.1.2 Definition of teacher professionalism

An explanation of the terminology of teacher professionalism is necessary before examining the various constructions of teacher professionalism and, consequently, of parent-teacher relations that influence policy and practice surrounding parental involvement in Irish primary schools. Helsby and McCullough (1996:56) differentiated between the terminology of professionalisation (‘issues of status that tend to preoccupy historians and sociologists’) and that of professionalism, which ‘refers to teachers’ rights and obligations to determine their own tasks in the classroom; that is, to the way in which teachers develop, negotiate, use and control their own knowledge’. It is professionalism,
therefore, that relates to the enhancement of the quality of service. This distinction is generally adhered to in the literature (cf. Hargreaves & Goodson 1996; Englund 1996) albeit Hilferty’s (2008:12, citing Hoyle & John 1995) differentiation between ‘professionalism’ and ‘professionality’ demonstrates that there is not complete agreement about the terminology. In any event Helsby and McCullough’s definition is adequate for the purposes of this paper. While teacher professionalism and teacher professionalisation are often presented as ‘complementary projects’ (Hargreaves 2000:152), particularly within managerial discourses of professionalism, they can be contradictory, as Hargreaves warned, and professionalisation does not always lead to greater professionalism.

Professionalism can be conceptualized as a ‘shifting rather than concrete phenomenon’ (Webb, Vulliamy, Hamalainen, Sarja, Kimonen & Nevalainen 2004:86, citing Hanlon 1998). Locke, Vulliamy, Webb and Hill (2005:558) noted how teacher professionalism can be defined from a socially constructed approach as well as from a criterion one. Karila and Alasuutari (2012:16) described, for instance, how the introduction of curriculum guidelines in Finland that required teachers to ‘re-orientate themselves in relation to parents’, also required teachers to ‘construct their professional identity accordingly’. This understanding of constructed professionalism allows the core argument that is presented in this paper to be made; namely that different constructions of teacher professionalism lead to different constructions of the parent-teacher relationship, and vice versa.

2.1.3 Parent-teacher relations from a teacher professionalism perspective

Three different constructions of parent-teacher relations, namely traditional, managerial and democratic relationships, each of which relate to a particular understanding of teacher professionalism, are discussed in turn in this chapter. This three part model of parent-teacher relations arises from an understanding that while traditional notions of teacher professionalism, and consequently, of parent-teacher relations, remain relevant for many teachers and parents, (Hargreaves 2000:152), the discourse of professionalism has diverged over the past three decades, resulting in the emergence of managerial and democratic professionalism, as summarised by Day and Sachs (2004:7). Managerial and democratic understandings of parental involvement have emerged in response, and these construct the parent-teacher relationship very differently from each other. Approaching the topic of parental involvement from these three perspectives has the potential to offer fresh insights into the construction of parent-teacher relations in schools and so their origins and sources, defining characteristics of, and implications for, parent-teacher relations are explored below.

The following discussion of differing constructions of parent-teacher relations within the overall discourse of parental involvement was informed by Woods’ (1988, cited by Edwards & Alldred 2000:438) classification of the development of parent-teacher relations in the 1980s as being ‘market-orientated, partnership and instrumental’. The categories used in this paper, related as it is to the Irish context, do not directly correspond with Woods’ ones. Bauch and Goldring’s (1998:25) four part model of parent-teacher relations (Parent Empowerment, Partnership, Traditional/Bureaucratic
and Teacher Professionalism) was also useful, although again the categories need to be labelled differently for the Irish context. These descriptive inconsistencies are of themselves illuminating, however, as they demonstrate the difficulties inherent in trying to conclusively separate discursive strands, given the intertwined and ever changing nature of discourse, and the difficulties in generalising across international contexts. Indeed, academic efforts to separate discourses into neatly defined categories have been criticised in the literature for artificiality and naivety (cf. Bucholtz 2001:173; Hyatt 2005:523). Therefore, it is acknowledged that the interpretations of traditional, managerial and democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations discussed below appear more simplistic and discrete for the purposes of conceptual clarification than they are when lived through and by teachers and parents. Nevertheless, the challenge of exploring differing constructions is rendered more practicable by using this approach.

2.2 Traditional constructions of parent-teacher relationships

2.2.1 Introductory summary of the key features of traditional parent-teacher relations

Traditional understandings of teacher professionalism offer a particular perspective on the relationship between teachers and parents, often characterised by a separation between home and school, as both are considered as having different tasks to accomplish in relation to the child. The expert teacher usually has responsibility for educational matters, with parents playing a supportive role. In such circumstances parental involvement in the school is not given high priority, and is viewed as outside of the core function of the teacher. The involvement that does occur tends to be controlled by teachers, with certain limited forms of involvement regarded as more appropriate than others. Teachers generally exercise more power than parents in such relationships, and working-class parents are likely to be especially powerless, often as a result of deficit model understandings that regard them as subjects to be educated. Arising from these understandings, the ‘good parent’ is ‘one who takes the lead of the school, who is involved but not too involved, and who supports but does not challenge’ (Nakagawa 2000:456; also found by Lareau & McNamara Horvat 1999:42).

Admittedly, the term ‘traditional’ is a wide-ranging and vague one, and cultural and social variations affect what is defined as ‘traditional’ in differing contexts. Given that a review of relevant international literature reveals similar approaches to parent involvement in schools in a wide range of settings, it seems reasonable to discuss the more longstanding aspects of these under the heading of ‘traditional constructions of the parent-teacher relationship’. These traditional approaches are generally regarded to have developed during the first six decades of the twentieth century approximately, and most of the literature addresses them in the context of the United States of America or the United Kingdom. While this may create difficulties in applying them to modern day Irish education, it would appear that there are sufficient similarities among the various education
systems, and between the past and the present, to allow literature from other contexts to provide insights into Irish schools as well. The following discussion outlines the origins, defining characteristics and implications of traditional approaches to parent-teacher relations, therefore.

2.2.2 Origins and sources of traditional teacher professionalism

2.2.2.1 Professionalisation leading to distancing of parents from schools

According to some commentators (especially American ones) a marginalization of parents in schooling and education was a consequence of the emergence of teaching as a profession during the twentieth century. For instance, in the context of the United States, Adams and Christenson (1999:477; citing Gareau & Sawatsky 1995:464) suggested that before World War Two schools were ‘natural extensions of the community’, but that this close relationship was lost as the professionalisation of teaching after that war resulted in a separation of home and school. Bauch and Goldring (1998:21) made a similar observation about the development of school bureaucracies and how the ‘increased emphasis on teacher-as-expert notion of teacher professionalism reduced the historic community influence of parents’ in the United States, although they dated this earlier, to the turn of the century (also Bauch 2001:206; Brien & Stelmach 2009:3). Feuerstein (2002:17/18), while admitting that the United States school boards of the late nineteenth century were often corrupt, found that they were more responsive to local needs than many of the school management structures that came later, and which by the 1970s had led to a situation where school administrators had the greatest authority over educational decisions. A similar argument was made by Gay and Place (2000:4) regarding these school boards, but they more explicitly identified ‘growing professionalism’ as a factor in ‘the lessening in the amount of influence that the average citizen was able to exert over school matters’.

However, the notion that professionalism impeded parent-teacher relationships has been disputed by some commentators. Lareau (1987:74) concluded the opposite, stating that ‘over time there has been a steady increase in the level of parental involvement in schooling’.

Lazar and Slostad (1999:207) asserted that ‘adversarial relationships between teachers and parents are rooted in the earliest days of our schooling culture’, referring to America. This point was also made by Miretzky (2004:818), and in Waller’s (1932, cited by Bauch & Goldring 2000:4) famous comment about parents and teachers being ‘natural enemies’. Furthermore, even if professionalisation did directly impact on involvement in the United States, this does not guarantee a similar connection elsewhere. De Gaetano (2007:146) was among the many commentators who mentioned international differences with regard to expectations of parental involvement.

One must be wary, therefore, of harking back to some utopian ideal of parent-teacher relations that existed in the past. There is little evidence for this, particularly in the Church dominated Irish education system (cf. Byrne & Smyth 2010:4), although the contrast between the involvement of parents in the hedge school system, and their exclusion after the introduction of the national education
system in 1831 (cf. Walshe McDonnell 1995) suggests that professionalisation had some impact on parental involvement in Ireland too.

2.2.2.2 Plowden Report

In any event, whether as a direct consequence of greater teacher professionalisation or not, it is generally agreed that by the mid twentieth century, limited attention was being paid to the role of parents in the schools which their children attended. The publication of The Plowden Report (1967), with its emphasis on child-centred education, and more specifically the devotion of a chapter to parent participation (Chapter 4, Participation by Parents), marked a turning point in attitudes to parental involvement in schools, at least in the United Kingdom (cf. Wolfendale 1996:23; Brook & Hancock 2000:260; Ranson, Martin & Vincent 2004:259). This is not to suggest that the benefits of parental involvement were unknown prior to this, as demonstrated by references in the report itself to the widespread existence of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) in American schools and to some examples of very active parental involvement in English schools (cf. Plowden 1987). However, it was after the publication of The Plowden Report that parental involvement in education came to be generally accepted as being part of a professional teacher’s good practice (Vincent 1996b:43). Therefore, what is described below as ‘traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations’ resulted from the combination of the recognition of the importance of parental involvement in schooling, with pre-existing notions of what it was to be a professional teacher.

2.2.2.3 Relevance of traditional professionalism to parent-teacher relations

Although they have been challenged and have had to adapt in light of educational changes, traditional concepts of teaching and parenting still exercise direct influence on the interactions of some parents and teachers. Furthermore, they have contributed much to what Hargreaves (2000:156) described as the ‘unquestioned grammar of teaching’. Given that ‘the past …shapes the present in terms of dispositions to each new reform, no matter what its intention’ (Blackmore 2010:108), it is necessary to examine traditional constructions of the parent-teacher relationship if the topic is to be fully explored.

2.2.3 Defining characteristics of traditional parent-teacher relations

The defining characteristics of traditional teacher professionalism, as they apply to parental involvement can be argued to include: teacher-as-expert, separation of home and school, teachers’ core responsibilities being to their pupils, professional insecurity and, perhaps, to some degree a fear of parents. These elements are discussed below.

2.2.3.1 Teacher-as-expert

Traditional constructs of parent-teacher relations tend to be predicated on the notion of the professional teacher-as-expert, who does not need the input of parents in order to accomplish his/her duties successfully. The parent-teacher relationship is generally based on the teacher providing
information on the child’s educational progression to the parents, usually in pre-defined and limited ways, such as through parent-teacher meetings or report cards. Within a ‘culture of isolation and individualism’ (Johnston & Hedemann 1994:303), teacher autonomy may be highly regarded, and parental involvement in the teacher’s domain of the classroom is viewed as unnecessary interference. In comparison with the expert knowledge of the teacher, parental knowledge of educational matters is often regarded as inferior; ‘teachers usually think that parents should keep their distance and know their place as they themselves do with regard to other professionals’ (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:571, citing Crozier 2000:17). Parents, respectful of the teacher’s professional knowledge, delegate educational responsibility to the school, and may exhibit high levels of trust for teachers and the education system (Georgiou 1998:363). Indeed, MacLure and Walker (2000:21) commented on how, during parent-teacher meetings, parents may act to ‘establish the teacher’s status as “the expert”’. The longstanding tradition of school teachers having a high status in Ireland (cf. Conway, Murphy, Rath & Hall 2009:171), indicates the particular applicability of this notion to Irish primary education.

2.2.3.2 Separation of home and school, fortress model
Arising from this notion of ‘teacher-as-expert’, a view of the home and the school as being entirely separate institutions is characteristic of traditional approaches to parent-teacher relations. Dom and Verhoeven (2006:575) described how, in the United Kingdom in 1966, white chalk lines were sometimes drawn to mark the school boundary beyond which parents should not pass. Such a construction positions parenting as part of the realm of the home, totally separate from that of the school (Epstein 1986:277), in which teachers are not perceived as needing to enquire into the home backgrounds of their students (Whitmore & Norton-Meier 2008:45). Parents and teachers are viewed as having ‘different things to get accomplished’ (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:371). Riley and Stoll (2004:38) discussed how a ‘fortress’ or ‘bubble’ model may develop when teachers attempt to insulate the school from the local community, often with the intention of providing pupils with space, opportunities and safety. Certain aspects of teaching and parenting may intersect (e.g. discipline and welfare) and in these aspects a somewhat greater level of cooperation between home and school may be evident, albeit that Bauch and Goldring (1998:19) noted how the teacher-as-expert style of professionalism ‘often shows little concern for overlapping roles of parents’. Although most of the literature makes reference to the United Kingdom or United States in describing these traditional relationships, and references to the actual drawing of lines were not found in the literature in relation to Ireland, Byrne and Smyth’s (2010) overview of the historic background to parental involvement in Irish schools suggests that a separation between home and school was also characteristic of Irish education, at least until the 1960s.

2.2.3.3 Teachers’ main responsibilities being to their pupils
As a consequence of regarding the home and school as separate, teacher professional self-images, identities and responsibilities have traditionally been formed in relation to educational work
with children, rather than work with parents (Hancock 1998:409). Arising from this, teacher relationships with parents have not been prioritised in constructs of teacher professionalism (Miretzky 2004:834). Since teachers may perceive that parental involvement initiatives, therefore, ask them ‘to work with a second client’, these initiatives are likely to be ‘particularly vulnerable to drift’ (Hancock 1998:408). Given that ‘teaching has a bottomless appetite’ for time, energy and personal resources (Nias 1989:18) it is unsurprising that what teachers see as ‘extra-role behaviours’ (Belogolovsky & Somech 2009:14) are the first to be sacrificed when they come under pressure. If teachers do not perceive a ‘social expectancy’ that part of being a professional teacher involves working with parents, then this is likely to affect their actual engagement with parents (cf. Pang & Watkins 2000:144).

Common sense understandings of the core role functions of a ‘good’ teacher are important then, in influencing teacher attitudes to parental involvement.

2.2.3.4 Professional insecurity

Although not perhaps as applicable to Irish education, in many countries teacher insecurity about their own professional status has been identified as a reason for teacher reluctance to engage with parents. The late emergence of teaching as a profession means that there is little consensus in public discourse internationally regarding its actual professional status (cf. Colley, James & Diment 2007:174; Tichenor & Tichenor 2005:89). Mockler (2005:734) noted that it is not just teachers and employers that ‘struggle over teacher professionalism’, but that governments, teacher unions, universities, parents and community groups all play a part. As Connell (1987:48) explained; ‘It (teacher professionalism) is too insecure in itself to undertake any major involvement in an exercise in its own demystification’. It is likely that meaningful parental involvement requires a great deal of demystification of the role of teachers, making their professional activities more visible and, hence, increasing their vulnerability to criticism and questioning (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:572). Given this insecurity, even the merest hint of a lack of respect for their professionalism can cause teachers to resist relationships with parents and act to protect their ‘professional territory’ (Pena 2000:43). Baker and Keogh (1995), who analysed teacher behaviours at parent-teacher meetings in Brisbane, provided illustrations as to how professional insecurity affects interactions at the individual level between parent and teacher. This probably pertains at a whole-school levels as well as, for instance, Georgiou (1998:365) discussed teacher concerns regarding powerful Parent Associations in Cyprus. If teachers seek to protect their own professional status in the face of calls for greater parental involvement by projecting a model of the ‘good’ teacher as a ‘cold, business-like professional’ (Lindle 1989:14), this provides little support for relationships of collaboration and co-operation with parents. It demonstrates how notions of traditional professionalism may cause teachers to use their own professionalism as an ‘attempt to distance themselves from parents’ (Baeck 2010: 334; also Dom & Verhoeven 2006:590).

Whether teacher concerns about parental involvement damaging their professional status and working conditions are warranted or not is debatable. Some commentators disregard the possibility of
parents posing a serious threat to teacher professionalism. For example, Lazar and Slostad (1999:209) reassured teachers that ‘inviting parental involvement however does not mean that parents will walk all over you to take charge of your classroom’. Admittedly there are relatively few examples of parents taking over in the literature reviewed, (Birenbaum-Carmeli’s (1999) Israeli account being a spectacular exception), but the few are probably enough for this to be of justifiable concern to teachers, causing them to become defensive and insular regarding parental involvement (Vincent 1996b). The sense that teachers have something to lose (Forster 1999:184) in the face of parental involvement permeates traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations, therefore. This seems to be true in Ireland as well (cf. Nic Craith 2003:30).

Making a contrary point, Cankar, Deutsch and Kolar (2009:23) suggested that teachers ‘have not developed an awareness of the public character of their work’, due in fact to their usually secure tenure and the difficulties inherent in accurately monitoring their professional competence. This allows for the possibility that it is professional security rather than insecurity that serves to prevent engagement with parents. Somewhat similarly, Lightfoot (1981: 98) suggested that teachers’ need for ‘boundary setting and territoriality’ does not always ‘symbolise threatened feelings toward parents’, but may be related to the need to protect teacher-child relationships. However, it remains plausible to argue that often teachers regard growing demands for more and meaningful parental involvement in schools, as ‘a threat towards their positions and their professionalism’ (Baeck 2010:325) and, indeed, that teachers who enjoy secure tenure may be all the more reluctant to engage with anything that might alter their situation.

2.2.3.5 Fear of parents

As well as concerns about their professionalism, a fear of parents and parental involvement on a more personal level is characteristic of many traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations as well (cf. Casanova 1996; Ranson et al. 2004:259). Parents can behave in irrational and unreasonable ways towards teachers, and it is likely that a few bad experiences with parents cause teachers to be very wary of the idea of greater parental involvement in schools or of parent-teacher partnership. Keller’s (2008:11) comment ‘In recent years, incidents reported in the news media have dabbed shadows on that glowing picture of parental involvement’, was written in the American context, but probably has international resonance. Koutrouba, Antonopoulou, Tsitsas and Zenakou (2009:319) commented on ‘parents’ arrogant behaviour’ in Greece, and the difficulties that arise when parent underestimate the difficulties of teaching, while Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyshiv (2008:397), in Israel, noted how empowered parents ‘may indeed affect teachers’ work and well-being’. Brien & Stelmach (2009:9, citing MacKay & Sutherland 2006) referred to Canadian teachers’ concerns about ‘harassment’ resulting from changes in the nature of parent-teacher interactions. A perception of parents as problems (Cullingford & Morrison 1999:260) undoubtedly blocks the growth of parental involvement in schools. The large numbers of parents that teachers have to interact with, and the sometimes intense
emotional involvement of parents, increases the likelihood of teachers meeting with hostile or resistant parents and, consequently, that they would ‘fear adversarial relationships’ with parents (Comer 2005:39). In light of this fearfulness, many teachers are anxious to differentiate between their personal and professional lives, and are fearful that parental involvement could result in their privacy being eroded (Miretzky 2004:816).

Admittedly, physically fearful relationships between teachers and parents do not seem characteristic of Irish schools, although the specified category of paid ‘assault leave’ in *Circular 32/2007* for primary teachers indicates that it has been deemed necessary to make arrangements for teachers who are assaulted in the course of their work, albeit not necessarily by parents. That the first two of the six categories relating to parent-teacher relations on the INTO website relate to complaints suggests that difficult relationships between parents and teachers are of concern in Irish schools, although of course people are more likely to want to access information on problematic relationships than they are on successful ones.

### 2.2.3.6 Traditional model challenged since 1970s but still pertinent

The above described model of the expert teacher, teaching children in isolation from the home and concerned with protecting the professional domain from parental intrusion, has been challenged by the growing awareness of the importance of parental involvement in their children’s education since the late 1960s and 1970s (Vincent & Tomlinson 1997:363). While a ‘no parents beyond this point’ (Cullingford & Morrison 1999:254) style of professionalism is no longer likely to be acceptable, Hallgarten (2000:28) suggested that a ‘no assertiveness beyond this line’ form may remain. In the UK context, Williams, Williams and Ullman (2002:1) noted the significant minority of parents who feared being labelled ‘troublemakers’ if they talked too much, so parents remain ‘wary of overstepping some unwritten mark in their relations with teachers’ (Harris & Goodall 2008:280). Lareau and Shumar (1996:34) described teachers as saying they wanted parental involvement, but actually wanting ‘deferential, positive and compliant behaviour’. Arguably then, the teacher-as-expert model of professionalism has evolved to a ‘transplant model’ (Dale 1996:9-11, 184) where parental involvement is acknowledged to the extent that teachers need to tell parents how best to support their children’s education. In this school-centric model the duty of the family ‘is to serve the interests of the broader school community’ (Evans & Shirley 2008:79). Although this model pays attention to the importance of parental involvement, if learning is still envisaged as primarily occurring in school under the control of the expert teacher, this reduces the potential role of parents, and ensures that school perspectives remain dominant (Warren & Young 2002:225). Despite being challenged and undergoing some change, traditional constructs of the parent-teacher relationship are not yet merely historical concepts (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:590).
2.2.4 Implications of traditional teacher professionalism for parent-teacher relations

The understanding that there is a separation between the home and the school, that teachers as experts have little need for parental input into the process of education, and that a teacher’s core professional responsibility is to his/her pupils, combined with teacher professional and personal insecurity, has implications for the parent-teacher relations that, despite the dominance of these traditional notions, have at the same time been viewed as increasingly important since at least 1967. These implications are discussed below, in terms of the types of parental involvement that are sanctioned by traditional constructs of parent-teacher relations, the power relations that exist between parents and teachers in the traditional model, and the ways in which parents are positioned by traditional understandings of the parent-teacher relationship.

2.2.4.1 Involvement as safe/sanctioned or threatening – zones of tolerance

Greater emphasis on the importance of parental involvement in education has resulted in a contradiction developing within traditional constructs of parent-teacher relations in that while teachers are fearful of parental involvement and ‘do not appreciate’ it, they also do not want parents to be indifferent to their children’s progress (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:571, citing Aelterman et al. 2002:33, referring to Flanders). This results in a tendency for teachers to seek to maintain control of the parent-teacher relationship, even as they accept that parental involvement is beneficial. The temptation to keep parents ‘subordinated to their control’ (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv 2008:410) is a recurring one in the literature; ‘Frequently, teachers prefer parents to be compliant supporters of their own views and to ask for parental support only when parents are willing to follow their instructions in areas that teachers consider to be their domain’ (Koutrouba et al. 2009:313 citing Finders & Lewis 1994; Tett 2001). Crozier (1999:324) was among the researchers who commented on the tensions surrounding seeking to involve parents while at the same time ‘maintaining the professional boundary’. Often attempts are made to resolve this tension by endeavouring to confine parental involvement to ‘safe’ forms of involvement, or ‘zones of tolerance’ (Bauch & Goldring 1998:26), with some types of involvement ‘sanctioned’ by teachers, whereas others, particularly when relating to groups of parents, ‘attract professional dissent’ (Vincent 1996b:10). In a climate where parental involvement is increasingly demanded, limited and teacher approved involvement enhances teacher reputations by allowing them to demonstrate some openness to parental involvement, while at the same time protecting teacher interests.

Contextual and cultural factors affect the classification of certain forms of parental involvement as safe/unsafe by teachers. In general, ‘sanctioned’ forms of involvement are those that could not possibly damage the teachers’ sense of professionalism and identity, as they ‘do not influence any of the main concerns of teaching’ (Todd & Higgins 1998:332; also Cankar et al. 2009:44; Bauch & Goldring 2000:4). They allow for ‘managed relationship’ that are ‘largely designed to limit and minimise professional exposure to risk’ (Giles 2006:258, citing Barr & Bizar 2001).
Whole-school involvement may be either ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’, with any involvement that is perceived to challenge the pedagogical expertise of the teacher deemed ‘unsafe’. These forms of involvement are discussed in more detail below.

**Safe /unsafe forms of involvement**

Examples of ‘sanctioned’ parental involvement include particular bounded tasks that do not relate directly to a teacher’s professional duties. For instance, Todd and Higgins (1998:232) described teachers being very enthusiastic about parents redeveloping a school’s grounds, as this was a safe type of involvement that had little chance of damaging traditional notions of teacher professionalism. Similarly, the tendency of teachers to be happy with parental involvement in fundraising initiatives is frequently commented upon in the literature (cf. Vincent & Martin 2000:460; Brain & Reid 2003:302; Dom & Verhoeven 2006:592; Chikoko 2008:249). Parental involvement in activities such as demonstrating national costumes or preparing food is also likely to be welcomed by teachers (cf. Sheperd & Johnson 2003:25). The ‘overt display’ nature of particular parental activities (Theodorou 2007:93) is likely to increase their acceptability to teachers. All of these ‘safe’ types of involvement are familiar in the Irish context.

Vincent and Martin (2002:120) suggested that as discipline and children’s happiness are aspects of school life that ‘engage the parent’s primary role as carer’, parental involvement in certain aspects of schooling such as codes of behaviour or special programmes, may be perceived as acceptable (cf. Ranson et al. 2004). MacGioillaPhádraig (2003a:42) in Ireland, found that both parents and teachers were ‘more affirmative’ of parental involvement in these areas. For many parents, these may be the only elements of schooling in which they feel confident of their own knowledge and competence, as Vincent and Martin (2002:117) found in their Willow/Carson study in the United Kingdom, that most ‘parents insisted on their own knowledge over professionals’ understandings only when severe welfare issues concerning their children arose’. Limiting parental involvement to behaviour or welfare concerns may, however, lead to problem-based contacts between parents and teachers, which are not conductive to the development of good parent-teacher relations in the long-term.

Similarly, it is usually agreed that parents have information about their own children’s learning styles, personalities, interests and that sharing this information with the school is likely to enhance the educational experiences of those children. This is unlikely to unduly threaten traditional teacher professionalism. However, even when the importance of good communication is recognised within traditional constructs of parent-teacher relations, it is likely that much of this communication takes place either in limited (possibly superficial) formal structures (cf. Walker 1998), or in a problem-solving context (cf. Adams & Christenson 1999:482), rather than in the context of deep and trusting relationships. Limiting the information made available to parents can be a way of controlling parental involvement, and is indicative of power being exercised by teachers as ‘keeping knowledge to oneself’
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is also a type of power’ (Dusi 2012:18). For example, Evans and Shirley (2008:82) referred to parents’ perceptions that schools tend to ‘keep parents informed only about activities that support their own agenda’, and that parents have to make ‘additional efforts’ if they wish to access other information.

It might be expected that traditional constructions of professionalism would result in teachers regarding parental involvement in whole-school decision-making or management structures as being a ‘dangerous’ type of involvement, given the impact that these decisions can have on the whole-school community. However, Johnston and Hedemann (1994:300) found that teachers were more comfortable collaborating with each other in relation to whole-school concerns, (such as playground rules and behaviour) rather than on aspects relating directly to their own teaching and their individual classrooms, which was threatening on a personal level. This suggests that teachers might find it easier to engage with parents in relation to the shared space of the whole-school. Parents may be less heavily invested in whole-school matters than that of individual pupils which may serve to reduce tensions. Also, since some financial, administrative, legal or maintenance tasks require skills for which teachers are not specifically trained, teachers may find it easier to accept parental assistance in these aspects of school management. This is not to deny, however, that concepts of parent-teacher relations that require sharing power and influence with parents in a whole-school sense are often perceived as intimidating by teachers, depending on the decisions being taken and the context of the school, and are frequently resisted in an attempt to protect teacher professionalism (cf. Pena 2000:43). If teachers feel professionally insecure or personally ill at ease regarding parental involvement, this is likely to be compounded by the grouped nature of much whole-school involvement, and the numerical imbalance between the teaching staff and the parent body in a school, which increases the chances of parents being able to ‘mobilise sufficient network resources ……to essentially trump the authority wielded by school officials’ (McNamara Horvat, Weininger & Lareau 2003:346).

Parental involvement that encroaches on the traditional domain of the teacher is generally a problematic issue in traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations (Crozier & Davies 2007:310). Such threatening knowledge generally, although not exclusively, relates to curricular, pedagogic or policy aspects of the school and the teacher’s classroom practice. Baeck (2010:325) noted the awkwardness that can exist in trying to define the legitimacy of what is ‘valid knowledge; the professional, specialised, expert knowledge of the teachers or parents’ experience-based knowledge’. According to Tveit (2009:289) it is teachers who, in contrast to many parents, ‘possess the power to uphold their values and epistemologies as legitimate’. Accordingly ‘teachers are not very inclined to treat parents as equals, defending, rather, their own professionalism and right to take educational decisions about those in their charge’ (Crozier 1996:263, citing Vassen 1986, Docking 1990). It is suggested in the literature (cf. MacLure and Walker 2000:19) that teachers feel especially threatened by parents who are also educational professionals, as their expertise may result in ‘a kind of counter-surveillance of the teacher’s domain’. Parental involvement that affects the teacher’s professional knowledge-base is, therefore, generally designated as highly threatening.
Contextual /cultural factors affecting ‘zones of tolerance’

Despite the general nature of the overview provided above, the categorisation of particular types of parental involvement as ‘safe’ or ‘threatening’ varies depending on the context of the school or interaction. This is illustrated with reference to parents volunteering in classrooms, which has the potential to be perceived in some contexts as quite threatening to teacher professionalism (Cochran & Dean 1991:267), whereas in other places it forms part of traditional parental involvement activities (Christenson & Hurley 1997:113) and so is not as threatening. The quantity of parental involvement in a school may also be pertinent, aside from the form it takes, with Morgan and Fraser (1993:48) suggesting that attention needs to be paid to how much parental involvement teachers can ‘handle’ before it becomes threatening. Interpersonal relationships between individuals also have a considerable impact on how various forms of parental involvement and behaviours are perceived.

The level of respect accorded to teaching as a profession varies from culture to culture, and parental involvement is liable to be more threatening to teacher professionalism in contexts where teaching does not traditionally enjoy high status as a profession. For instance, Birenbaum-Carmeli’s (1999:87) description of parents usurping the professional obligations of teachers in Israel seems closely related to a view of teaching in that country as being ‘a last resort for young women with few alternatives’. However, even in contexts were teachers are highly qualified and highly regarded, the retention of their professional status remains pertinent, as Baeck (2010:333) found during her interviews with Norwegian teachers, where the issue of teacher professionalism was frequently raised (even though teachers in Norway are very highly qualified and proud of their professional status). If teachers enjoy a high status they might be all the more acutely aware of the threats to their professionalism that parental involvement might create, particularly when they consider the experiences of colleagues in contexts where teaching is not respected. This latter point may apply especially to Ireland, given the high status traditionally enjoyed by Irish teachers (cf. Coolahan 2003), especially when compared to teachers in the United Kingdom and America.

Cultural factors play a more direct role as well in determining how parent-teacher relations have been traditionally constructed. For instance, Sohn and Wang (2006:125) noted that Confucianism in Asian societies often results in parents entirely delegating educational matters to the teacher (also Theodorou 2007:93). Birenbaum-Carmeli’s (1999) description of parents taking over the running of a school might be associated with the Israeli emphasis on collectivism, whereas it would be difficult perhaps to imagine such unity and determination in the Irish context. With regard to Ireland, Drudy and Lynch (1993:75) noted that the Catholic Church has traditionally been the main ‘civilising force’ in Irish society, and its emphasis on qualities such as self-control, orderliness, obedience and discipline resulted in a culture that is not orientated towards a united challenging of major institutions. Similarly, what Borg and Mayo (2001:257) referred to as ‘pulpit pedagogy’ in Catholic Malta, may have assisted the creation of the teacher-as-expert model of professionalism, and the reluctance of parents to challenge it, a scenario surely also applicable to Ireland. On the contrary, however, Warren...
et al. (2003:63) suggested that the provision of holistic education and the creation of communities that is part of the mission of Catholic education, makes the development of ‘collaborative and participative partnerships’ essential for Catholic schools. Therefore, while issues of local or national culture are likely to influence the development of parental involvement in schools, it is important not to overgeneralise, bearing in mind factional interests and individual differences that exist within cultures as well (cf. Ranson et al. 2003:725; De Gaetano 2007:148).

2.2.4.2 Power relations between parents and teachers in traditional constructs

Teachers are placed in a powerful position in schools relative to parents by the teacher-as-expert model and the assumption that parents do not have an entitlement to participation in schools. However, the existence of concerns about professional insecurity in the face of parental involvement also suggests that this teacher power may be limited, especially when parental involvement involves groups of parents.

Teachers powerful in traditional constructs

Traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations are usually characterised by teachers having a greater capacity to exercise power in the relationship than do parents (cf. Tveit 2009:297; also Stelmach 2005:180). That many parent-teacher partnerships are ‘established on the professional’s terms – conceptualized through professional ideology and articulated through professional language’ (Webster 2004:122, in the United States), indicates the degree to which this power can extend. Some commentators view the power differential between schools and homes as being so pervasive, that even relatively innocuous aspects of home-school relations, such as homework, can be envisaged as ‘a way of the school monitoring the household, as well as dictating its schedule’, and of breaking down the public/private divide ‘by bringing the work of the school into the home’ (Standing 1999a:489). Indeed, Edwards and Warin (1999:357) remarked on ‘colonisation of the home by the school’. Teacher power in the relationship may also be observed in the physical actions of parents in schools, according to Hobbins McGrath (2007:1410). Power imbalances that favour teachers appear likely to apply in the same way to Irish parents and teachers, if Hanafin and Lynch’s (2002) account of parental frustrations in the school they studied is representative of Irish schools more generally.

The model of teacher as the professional who knows best is an important source of power for teachers in their interactions with parents (cf. Crozier 1999; Dom & Verhoeven 2006:571). The place of the teacher in the ‘routinised and established pattern of school life’, further contributes to teacher power in comparison with that of parents (Hancock 1998:407). Teachers have relevant knowledge about schools and education, have daily access to the context in which decision-making occurs and are also the ones entrusted with carrying out most of the decisions made, regardless of who has been involved in making them (Van Wyk 2007:134). Often they choose the time, location and agenda for interaction with parents. ‘The rules of the game within the context of the school are based upon teachers’ definitions of involvement, partnership, cooperation, trust and deference’ (Crozier
2001:334). If teachers are not interested in parental involvement, parents have few options (cf. Sykes 2001:284).

Since parents’ power ‘is mediated by their desire to know about their child’s experience’ in school, the information teachers have about the children serves as a significant source of teacher power (Hobbins McGrath 2007:1409). Not only do teachers tend to have control of the information given to parents, they frequently they control its presentation as well (Donnelly 1999:230, citing Handy & Aitken 1986). Hobbins McGrath (2007:1414) also noted the implications of the direct power that teachers have over the parent’s children, and how this adds to the parents’ sense of vulnerability.

Additionally, the institutional and imposing nature of schools assists in construing parents as less powerful in the parent-teacher relationship. While people often tend to be docile when faced with the power of major institutions, this may be especially applicable to educational institutions because schools tend to be manifestly concerned with demonstrating power and maintaining control over pupils; ‘in school, teachers are the ones who decide ‘what can be said and thought’ and ‘who can speak, when, and where and with what authority’ (Ball 1994a:21). Parents have themselves had experience of being in school as pupils who had to obey the authority of the school. Indeed, Hancock (1998:405) commented that parents’ levels of familiarity with traditional arrangements in schools are such that ‘they can be confused when established patterns are changed’. This notion of submission to the institutional power of the school was highlighted in Morgan and Fraser’s (1993:46) account of how parents involved in setting up integrated schools in Northern Ireland experienced a sense of ‘losing the school’ once traditional educational decisions had to be taken, despite their high level of involvement in earlier practical decisions. Interestingly, one of those parents described this in terms of roles becoming ‘normalised’ which indicates the extent to which traditional constructs of the parent-teacher relationship remain dominant.

Parents position themselves in response to traditional professionalism

Not only do traditional constructs of teacher professionalism position teachers powerfully in relation to parents, they also cause parents to position themselves in less powerful ways. For example, Lai and Vadeboncoeur’s (2013:920) research with Chinese Canadian mothers revealed how those mothers positioned themselves according to a ‘host/guest’ metaphor, where they tried to be undemanding guests of the ‘host’ school. The notion of a professional boundary between home and school is so strong, that it is often parents themselves who police it; ‘the hegemony of the lay-professional boundary is so complete that when it is perceived some parents have overstepped the boundary, it arouses disapproval in others’ (Crozier 1999:323; also Brien & Stelmach 2009:6; Crozier & Davies 2007: 309). This parent positioning is often supported by the actions of teachers; ‘Teacher’s behaviour ....reinforces parents’ terms of reference...that it is not their place to know, to interfere or to take an active and equal role in their children’s schooling’ (Crozier 1999:323, citing Brown 1987). However, the power of the home-school border lingers even in the absence of teacher protection:
‘Even when the school is at its most advanced in opening itself to parents, the latter still feel the barrier of the ‘professional’ (Cullingford & Morrison 1999:260). While this may relate to certain parents’ experiences of the deficit model, it may also be that for parents whose children are progressing well in school they see little need to alter the status quo that is benefitting themselves and their families (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:593). Notably, however, the strength of the boundary between home and school in traditional constructions does not appear to reassure teachers to the extent that they might loosen their guard of it.

**Teachers aware of potential power of parents**

Notwithstanding the powerful positioning of teachers in traditional constructions of parent-teacher relationships, an awareness of the potential power of parents underlies this. Given the critical mass of parents, it is possible, even when they appear powerless, that parents are allowing, consciously or unconsciously, teachers to exercise power, rather than being in an inherently powerless position themselves (Vincent 1996b:3/4). Hobbins McGrath (2007:1412), (admittedly in a private care setting) found that ‘in individual interactions in the classroom, teachers had the advantage; however, institutionally, parents as a group were more powerful than the teachers’. Parental involvement can be construed, therefore, as ‘an assertion of power’ in the institutional arena of the school (McNamara-Horvat et al. 2003:346). Presumably if teachers were really confident in their dominance of the parent-teacher relationship, they would not be as inclined to view it as threatening to their professionalism.

The power exercised by teachers in traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations, and yet their awareness of the potential power of parents, makes Bourdieu’s (1993:72, cited by Baek 2010:324/5) contention that ‘every field holds a struggle between the newcomer who has to break through the entry barrier and the dominant agent who tries to defend this monopoly and keep out competition’, relevant for parent-teacher relations. In the traditional model, teachers are the ‘dominant agents’ with parents in the role of ‘newcomers’. According to Bourdieu, dominant agents are inclined towards conservation strategies, as they seek to maintain their power, whereas the newcomers tend towards subversion strategies, in order to alter the status quo. Meaningful parent-teacher partnership, which would be likely to radically alter the power relations in schools, is unlikely to be palatable to those who have power under existing structures. This helps explain teacher resistance to it and the resulting survival of traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations.

**2.2.4.3 Positioning of parents as ‘good’ and ‘less good’ in traditional constructs**

While parents are generally regarded as being relatively powerless in traditional constructs of parent-teacher relations, it is too simplistic to discuss parents as if they were a homogenous group and, indeed, the tendency of policy-makers and some researchers to do this has been widely criticised (*inter alia* Crozier & Reay 2005: ix, 155; Reay 2005:30; Vincent & Tomlinson 1997:369). While it would be impossible to account for all individual differences among parents, it is necessary to acknowledge that ‘sanctioned’ parental involvement and power relations within traditional discourses of parent-teacher
relations vary, most usually as a result of the social class backgrounds of parents. There is some reference, especially in American literature, to differential positioning of rural and urban parents (cf. Maynard & Howley 1997; Bauch 2001) but the differentiations do not appear to be as clear as those for social class. Raveaud and Van Zanten (2007:117/119) noted that it is more socially acceptable to attempt to identify differences based on social class than ethnicity; consequently, issues relating to minority ethnicity parents are often discussed in terms of social class. It is from a social class perspective that the varying approaches to parents in traditional constructs of parent-teacher relations are considered below.

The place of educated, middle-class parents in traditional constructs of parent-teacher relations is quite complex. From one perspective the cultural and social capital possessed by these parents is beneficial for schools (Ranson, Arnott, McKeown, Martin & Smith 2005:367), teachers tend to approve of their ‘cultural dispositions’ (De Graaf, De Graaf & Kraaykamp 2000:96), and their ‘professional credentials’ ‘may imbue an initial level of trust’ (Adams & Christenson 1999:491) between them and teachers. It is generally these parents who are involved in school management structures and other formal parental involvement organisations (cf. Reay 1996; Crozier 1999). Parents of high socio-economic status find it easier to become involved in schools than do other parents, and the social, cultural and material resources that they can access usually mean that they can make their voices heard, even if they fall outside teachers’ definitions of the ‘good parent’ (Crozier 2001:338). Phillips (2005:93) noted that a high social position, as well as giving parents a sense of entitlement, ‘helps them to present their demands as a generalised common sense while less powerful groups seem to be calling for special treatment’. Consequently, the limited parental involvement that is sanctioned within traditional understandings of the parent-teacher relationship is most likely to pertain to middle-class, educated parents.

Notwithstanding the above, however, teacher insecurity with regard to more ‘prestigious’ parents was much noted in the literature (inter alia Dom & Verhoeven 2006:572; Birenbaum-Carmeli 1999:87; Lareau 1989/2000). There is a fear that the access to resources these parents have, that allow their involvement in schools in the first place, permit them to ‘enforce their demands’ (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyshiv 2008:397), and result in them being ‘aspirational in a demanding way’ (Thrupp & Lupton 2011:309; also Baeck 2010:334). While the middle-class parents are those most likely to be active in schools, ‘active’ does not necessarily equate to ‘good’ in traditional discourses. It is middle-class parents who are most likely to perceive the effects of the metaphorical line that parents should not cross, as these are the parents most likely to test it (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:575). Brook and Hancock (2000:264, citing David et al. 1993; Vincent 1996; Hancock 1998) noted the resulting ‘ambivalence’ to middle-class parents; ‘gratitude for additional resources, but wariness about closer involvement, sometimes supported (or rationalised) by anxiety about professional dilution and reduced professional autonomy’. Consequently, according to Baeck (2010:333) teachers try to ‘keep a certain professional distance’ from these parents and (in Norway anyway), feel the need ‘to keep parents in
their place’. There is little reason to suggest that the situation is different in Irish schools, with Hanafin and Lynch (2002:35/36) describing how middle-class parents are ‘most involved, most visible and…proximal to schools.

In contrast, working-class (cf. Hartas 2008) and migrant parents (cf. López, Scribner & Mahituvianichchha 2001) are often regarded through a deficit perspective in traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations. Indeed, the initial interest in parental involvement in schools arose from a perception that working-class homes were ‘areas of cognitive deprivation’ and that schools had an obligation to compensate for such shortfalls (Edwards & Warin 1999:326, citing Tizard et al. 1981; also Hobbins McGrath 2007:1403). Bakker and Denessen (2007:188), similarly, traced the development of parental involvement to ‘language compensation programmes’ implemented in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and Europe, which targeted low socio-economic and minority families, and which typically sought to ‘tighten the bond between parents and the school’ (Karsten 2006:264). An enduring tendency for parental involvement to be connected with issues of educational disadvantage was apparent during the literature review (inter alia Hango 2007; Giles 2006; Karsten 2006; Sykes 2001:275) with little reference found to parental involvement in middle-class communities, at least compared to the amount that focussed on working-class or minority parents (Raveaud & van Zanten 2007; Thrupp & Lupton 2011; Vincent & Ball 2007, being exceptions). Admittedly this absence may be due to other reasons than a continuation of the deficit approach and, indeed, Power (2001) has argued that educational research in general has tended to ignore middle-class experiences.

While Tizard and Hughes ‘debunked’ the deficiency model as early as 1984, (Edwards & Warin 1999:326), an inclination to blame parents ‘for a wide array of problems’ (Filp 1998, citing Icaza & Mayorga 1994) remains widespread in public and professional discourse, not just that of teachers (cf. Vincent & Martin 2002:124). Hornby (2000:5-7), discussed teachers’ tendency to regard parents as problems, adversaries, vulnerable, less able, needing treatment, causal of their children’s problems and to be kept at a professional distance. Interestingly, Hobbins McGrath (2007:1417) identified an inverse deficit model, as parents in her study, despite being in a superior class position than the teachers, were regarded as incapable of satisfactory involvement because they were stressed and time poor as a result of their high flying careers. Nonetheless, the deficit model approach is usually very closely associated with lower social class or ethnic background issues with, for instance, Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001:97) noting how ‘all too often’ it is assumed that low-income, minority parents are assumed to be ‘too lazy, incompetent, or preoccupied to participate’ as the school wishes. It is notable that these deficit perspectives may not now be as openly admitted to as they were in the past but, nevertheless, remain influential (Vincent & Tomlinson 1997:365).

Traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations tend to construe working-class parents in very different ways than from middle-class ones, in many cases redefining ‘working-class mothers as pupils to be educated’ (Edwards & Warin 1999:332), and ‘dependent’ on professionals (Vincent
2001:360), a process Reay (1999:165) referred to as ‘infantilism’. However, since these working-class parents are not perceived as a threat to teacher professionalism (Reay 1996: 584) and perhaps because ‘teaching’ them aligns with a teacher’s core function, there tends to be more openness to their involvement in schools than that of the often vocal and threatening middle-classes. This openness should not be overstated, however, as Borg and Mayo (2001:255) made reference to teachers being fearful of maintaining their professional status in light of the involvement of parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds as well. Furthermore, the sense that working-class parents ‘feel and are treated’ as less ‘valuable’ to schools than are professional parents (Coco, Goos & Kostegriz 2007:74) demonstrates the limited nature of this accessibility.

Unsurprisingly, working-class and minority parents’ perceptions of their own potential role in schools are affected by these deficit model approaches, with Crozier (1999:319/320) among the many commentators that noted the deference often extended to teachers by these parents. She noted that ‘there is a certain resignation embodied in this view’ as these parents usually do not have the access to personal or financial resources to be other than deferent and trusting. Although Lareau (2002:749) remarked on the respect and acceptance with which working-class parents have been found to interact with professionals, in contrast to Crozier, she described these parents as tending to be more distrustful of professionals than their middle -class counterparts. Notwithstanding, however, the multitude of interconnected factors acting as barriers to the involvement of working-class parents in schools, Crozier (1999:327) found that their ‘fatalistic’ attitude and sense that teachers were ‘superior and distant’ tends to be ‘reinforced by teachers’ own stance’.

While working-class and middle-class parents are positioned differently in traditional constructs of parent-teacher relations, it must be acknowledged that all parents are affected by ‘the entrenched traditions of professional exclusivity and lay silence’ (Vincent 1997:360). The teacher-as-expert model not only influences parent-teacher relations through its implications for teacher role construction, but also through its direction of parental role construction in particular ways.

2.2.5 Concluding comments on traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations

In summary, traditional discourses of the parent-teacher relationship involve teacher defensiveness of the professional domain and parental reluctance to interfere in teachers’ work. Such is the hegemonic strength of the discourse that people may not realise or be able to articulate the reasons behind their attitudes to parental involvement in schools; ‘we were struck by this mixture of parents’ hesitancy to get involved and educator’s subtle and even unintentional resistance to parental involvement’ (Comer 2005:39). Hancock (1998:406) described a parental involvement initiative that ‘did not set out to redraw the boundaries between the home and the school’, as ‘to a large extent it was assumed that these where there to be worked with’, which illustrates the extent to which traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations are so accepted and common sense that people may be unable
to conceive of alternatives. The consequences of taken-for-granted assumptions in terms of discursive production are discussed in Section 2.6.1.4.

2.3 Managerial constructions of the parent-teacher relationship

2.3.1 Introductory summary of the key features of managerial parent-teacher relations

Over the past thirty years, managerial understandings of teacher professionalism have emerged, resulting in different perspectives on the relationship of parents and teachers. Managerial approaches to parent-teacher relations are characterised less by a separation between the functions of home and school, and more by relationships of surveillance between them. While the teacher may still be regarded as the educational expert, his/her accountability in terms of achieving certain standards is stressed, and parents are often seen as having a policing role in relation to education. The rewards and sanctions of this policing role are applied through a market model of school choice, where schools compete for pupil numbers and, consequently, for financial resources. Parent involvement tends to be predicated on the achievement of policy-makers aims, and emphasis is usually placed on parental involvement as a means to raise attainments. This and the competition among schools and among pupils in the market model, results in the maintenance of a deficit model towards working-class and minority ethnicity families. The language of partnership, democracy and parental empowerment is frequently central to managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations, but superficial relationships and powerlessness for both parents and teachers can ensue from them.

Managerial teacher professionalism, from which the above description of parent-teacher relations arises, was referred to by many terms in the literature reviewed, including: ‘New Professionalism’ (Furlong 2008; Conway et al. 2009), ‘Techno-reductionist Professionalism (Locke et al. 2005), ‘New Public Management’ (Hood 1991; Mahony & Moos 1998; Verger & Curran 2014), ‘Performativity’ (Ball 2003), ‘entrepreneurial professionalism’ (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002) and ‘demanded professionalism’ (Evans 2011). Ball (1997b) made a distinction between ‘old managerialism’ and ‘new managerialism’ with regard to public sector reform in the UK; it is ‘new managerialism’ that is discussed in this research. To avoid confusion and because it is an acceptable term in Irish literature (cf. Lynch, Grummell & Devine 2012) the descriptor ‘managerial professionalism’ is most often employed throughout this thesis. The following discussion of managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations considers their origins, defining characteristics and implications for parental involvement.

2.3.2. Origins/sources/context of managerial teacher professionalism

2.3.2.1 Description

In describing the ‘new orthodoxy’ of educational reform that is referred to as the managerial approach in this paper, Ball (1998:122-123) specified five elements or influences ‘which run through it’; namely neo-liberalism, new institutional economics which seek to explain the workings of social
life in terms of the actions and choices of the rational actor, performativity, public choice theory and new public management. Managerial approaches to schooling can be associated with neo-conservative philosophies as well as neo-liberalism (Apple 2014: xix). The assumption that competitive markets can provide solutions to educational problems is a feature of neo-liberalism, while neo-conservatism tends to be concerned with the identification of ‘real knowledge’; hence, its ‘back to basics’ approach (Gardin & Apple 2002:27). Locke at al (2005) noted the audit approach to accountability, the constraining of teacher autonomy through extrinsic accountability methods, and the focus of teaching as being the raising of the academic achievements of all children, as characteristic of managerial systems. The objectives of managerialism are achieved through centrally imposed learning standards, detailed curriculum targets, pervasive testing regimes, shrinking public sector finances, tightening policy controls, and pressure to get students to learn new skills (Hargreaves 2000:151), as well as ‘offering rewards for those who improve and sanctions for those who do not’ (Bousted & Johnson 2005:17). Locke at al (2005) suggested that managerial collegiality in such systems is contrived, and that professional development often aims to encourage teachers to implement government reforms. ‘The successful professional in this context is one who works efficiently and effectively in meeting standards, for both teachers and pupils, which are set by others’ (Bousted & Johnson 2005:17). This version of teacher professionalism can be seen as inherently incompatible with, and in opposition to, traditional understandings of a teacher’s professional work (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyshiv 2008:395, citing Shedd & Bacharach 1991; also Colley et al. 2007:175).

2.3.2.2 Influence of England

Developments in education in England were very influential in the emergence of managerial professionalism, with Wrigley (2003:108) describing England as ‘an experimental test bed for school effectiveness’. Ball (2008:14) quite precisely dated these educational reforms to the policies of the UK Conservative governments during 1979-1997, and those of New Labour after 1997. He identified the linking of education policy with the global economy, the idea of the knowledge economy and increasing globalisation/glocalisation as important in triggering a need for reform. The resurgence of neo-liberalism and the dominance of the New Right during this time period resulted in reforms that were based around ‘the twin pillars’ of individual liberty and market freedom (Ball 2008:75/76). For Ball (2008:76), the 1980 Education Act was the ‘first legislative fruit’ of the reform policy, with the 1988 Education Reform Act providing the ‘main platform’ (Ball 2008:80). Reforms included the publication of a ‘Parents’ Charter’ (1991) to give parents the right to access information on school performance, per capita funding, diversity of provision, competition between schools, the publication of league tables, forms of school management modelled on business, and a complex infrastructure for testing and assessment (Ball 2008:81). The educational reforms implemented in England during Blair’s term as Prime Minister continued the managerial approach of the previous two decades (cf. Furlong 2008), with Locke et al. (2005:557) describing pedagogical prescription, auditing
mechanisms, and the refocusing of initial and in-service teacher education as part of ‘an intensified emphasis upon the raising of standards’, by New Labour. Evans (2011) outlined how the managerial approach to teacher professionalism, particularly in relation to ‘standards’ for teachers, is being further strengthened by the current coalition government in the UK. Although the existence of competing discourses was recognised by Webb et al. (2004:87), in general the dominance of managerial approaches in the English education system is such that it has been used as the exemplar of managerial teacher professionalism in studies that compared various understandings of professionalism (cf. Webb et al. 2004; Mahony & Moos 1998; Locke et al. 2005). Ball (2008:1) described how the English policies of school-based management, parental choice, information and accountability systems and privatisation are now being ‘exported’ around the world. The resulting Anglo-centric nature of educational commentary on managerial approaches to teacher professionalism and educational management can pose difficulties when examining other contexts, such as those of Ireland, that are not as heavily invested in managerial approaches, and to which not all of the analysis might apply therefore.

2.3.2.3 International context

Managerial approaches in education can be detected in many international contexts at the present time (cf. inter alia Webb et al. 2004; Locke et al. 2005; Lingard, Martino & Rezai-Rachti 2013). Adler (1997: 303) noted managerial aspects in the educational systems of Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States of America, and it has been identified even in the very different political and cultural context of China (Wong 2008). New Zealand was the first country to engage in a ‘thoroughgoing market reform of education’ (Ball 2008:46), which it did in 1988, and Ball (1998:125) described New Zealand and Alberta, Canada, as having, along with England, ‘the purest and most intense versions’ of the managerial policy ensemble. ‘Low-intensity versions of managerialism have been identified in other places, such as France, Colombia and Portugal (Ball 1998:125). Ball (2008:1; also Apple 2014) noted the influence of supra-national organisations such as the World Bank, the OECD and the EU in promulgating policies relating to public sector reform, quasi-market approaches, quality assurance, etc. Unsurprisingly different countries have applied managerial approaches to education in various ways, depending on their cultural and historical circumstances; for instance, Verger & Curran (2014:253) discussed how NPM adopted in Spain is ‘far from the model advocated by the international community’. Different forms of managerialism have also been identified within countries (Mahony & Moos 1998:304/305), with Ball (1998:125) referring to ‘low intensity’ and ‘hybrid’ versions.

Despite these variations, however, the seven ‘doctrines’ of New Public Management identified by Hood (1991:4-5) in England, have international resonance: ‘hands on professional management; explicit standards and measures of performance; greater emphasis on output controls; disaggregation of units; introduction of competition; stress on commercial styles of management; and
stress on doing more for less’. Additionally, Vincent and Tomlinson (1997:364) emphasised the ‘privileging of business interests in and approaches to the management and organisation of education’ as being characteristic of ‘new managerialism’. These aspects feature in what Ball (2008:13) described as the ‘ensemble of generic policies’ that have ‘global currency’ in relation to educational reform at the present time.

2.3.2.4 Applicability to Ireland

Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012) explained how the religious organisation of Irish education provision, the strength of the teacher unions, the presence of teachers on all major decision-making bodies including the government, and the smallness of Irish schools where the manager/teacher divide is not strongly pronounced means that the introduction of managerialism into Irish education has differed from other contexts. It has not entered into an unoccupied space but rather has been mediated and challenged by complicated pre-existing identities in Irish education. This makes the precise influence of managerial discourses difficult to identify, albeit their influence is not denied.

According to Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012:10) the presence of accountability as a strong theme in the 1995 Education White Paper, and the ‘language of the market’ in Implementing the Agenda for Change in 1996 indicate the emergence of distinctly managerial policies in Irish education from the mid-1990s onwards. MacGiollaPhádraig (2005:97) noted the prescriptive tone of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum as evidence of increasing central control of education in Ireland, and described how Ireland has ‘not been immune’ from the drive towards formalised national assessment that is apparent in Britain. Sugrue (2011:70) explicitly identified a strong presence of managerialism in Irish education policies, and Bleach (2010:8) described the DES as conforming to ‘the market-based model of public management’. Arguably the effects of these policies have been more pronounced for recent years, for instance, in the increased emphasis on standardised test results in Whole-School Evaluations since June 2010 (DES Inspectorate 2010), the ‘back to basics’ tone of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES 2011), and the more explicit attainment monitoring role for the Boards of Management appointed in 2011. The notion that the influence of managerialism is strengthening as time passes concurs with Sugrue’s (2006:192) description of ‘policy by stealth’ as a feature of Irish policy-making. Ball (2013), in an address given as part of The Vere Foster Trust/Institute of Educational Research in Ireland lecture series, made many explicitly Irish references when discussing the ‘slouching beast’ of neo-liberalism in education policy. Similarly, Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012) displayed no shortage of material when they analysed ‘new managerialism’ in Irish education policy. Managerial constructions of the parent-teacher relationship are, therefore, relevant in the Irish context.

The influence of these managerial constructions is challenged, however, by unique features of the Irish education system, as noted above. Furthermore, as Lynch, Grummell and Devine (2012:15)
found, the managerial constructions presence at national levels in Irish education are not necessarily reflected at school levels, which have remained somewhat insusceptible to managerialism. This point was also made by Sugrue (2011:71) whose analysis of Whole-School Evaluation reports found a ‘lexical lacuna’ between policy concerns and practice. He also found that while increasing paper-based accountability demands are being placed on Irish teachers, these are modest in comparison with the demands in the United Kingdom. That school choice has been a longstanding feature of the Irish education system means that it does not yet have the market effects evident in other countries, at least at primary level (Buchanan & Fox 2008:269). Bleach (2010:8) stated that ‘the Irish government does not encourage market forces in education to the same extent as other Western governments such as Great Britain and the United States’. While market effects are more obvious at second level, Lynch and Moran (2006:232) noted how much of these effects operate outside of the state controlled education system, and are driven by social class differences rather than managerially inspired government policy, albeit they noted the influence of wider neo-liberal discourses on the educational system. Nic Craith (2003) took an optimistic view of Irish education, emphasising how the ‘partnership’ approach to education policy-making had resulted in ‘a discernible reaffirmation of the role of the teacher as a professional rather than a skilled or trained operative’ (p17). She lauded the involvement of practicing teachers in the School Development Planning Initiative, albeit she did acknowledge that the SDPI ‘had the potential to lead to increased centralised control and the de-professionalization of teachers’ (p20). Perhaps then, it can be argued that a mild, but intensifying form of managerialism is presently at work in the Irish education system.

2.3.2.5 Relevance of managerial professionalism to parent-teacher relations

Since market approaches to education are rooted in a neo-liberal understanding that competitive relationships between schools will ‘create pressure on schools to perform well and reflect the wishes of parents and pupils rather than teachers and administrators’ (Adler 1997:302), parental involvement is both a major concern and a major instrument of such approaches (cf. Fan & Williams 2009:53 regarding the No Child Left Behind Act 2001 in the United States). Despite this emphasis, however, the emergence of the managerial approach seems likely to further damage the already fragile sense of professionalism experienced by teachers, and compound their insecurity in engaging with parents, for fear that parental involvement will further erode their professional status and sense of professionalism. Consequently, it is necessary to examine the ways in which managerial teacher professionalism serves to construct relations between teachers and parents in schools.

2.3.3 Defining characteristics of managerialism

The defining characteristics of managerial teacher professionalism, as they apply to parental involvement, include: obscuring use of language, emphasis on school effectiveness, legislative and
standards-based approach, accountability, measurability, school choice, parents as consumers, financial efficiency and democratic justification. These features are discussed in turn below.

2.3.3.1 Recontextualisation of terminology

Recontextualisation, defined by Singh, Thomas and Harris (2013:465) as ‘the relational processes of selecting and moving knowledge from one context to another, as well as to the distinctive re-organisation of knowledge as an instruction and regulative or moral discourse’ is a useful concept for any consideration of discourse, and arguably has particular relevance when considering managerial discourses at the present time.

Language is always used to influence other people of the merits of a particular position or viewpoint, and as such is sometimes used to obscure more than to define. Particular problems arise when trying to define terms associated with managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations, given the ‘very overt political role’ language plays in managerial discourses (Bowe, Gewirtz & Ball 1994:67). The tendency of policy-makers to use ‘condensation symbols’ (Vincent 1996b:230, citing Edelmann 1964) so as to increase public sympathy and support for their decisions is much referenced in the literature. Managerial approaches often use the terminology of empowerment, consultation, collaboration and consensus to further and possibly to disguise policy objectives (inter alia Locke et al. 2005:557; Bauch 2001:205). Vincent (1996b:73) noted how ‘reliance on consensual language....edits out tension and conflict’. This strategy avoids provoking the opposition that might emerge were policy intentions to be defined precisely and openly. Furthermore, by concealing meaning it hampers clear debate. Locke et al. (2005:576) noted how teachers ‘were being subtly interpellated to bring new meaning to some of the concepts’ they were attached to as professional values’. For instance, Darling-Hammond (1990:31, cited by Webb et al. 2004:86) contended that the term ‘teacher professionalism’ in the United Kingdom now means ‘an unquestioning compliance to agency directives’ which demonstrates the extent to which managerial discourse has taken over the language of teacher professionalism. This ‘recontextualisation’ of existing terminology such that it means something different in managerial terms is a powerful strategy of discursive legitimation (cf. Bernstein 1996, cited by Ball 1998).

Words associated with vague concepts are especially vulnerable to being ‘strategically deployable shifters’ (Urciuoli 1999:289). For instance, terminology important to parent-teacher relations, such as ‘autonomy’, ‘decentralisation’ and ‘collaboration’, are, according to Gardin and Apple (2002:29) ‘currently rearticulated by neo-liberals’. Bastiani (1987:105) discussed how notions of ‘parental co-operation’, ‘home-school partnership’ and ‘parental choice’ have ‘been appropriated and exploited in different ways’ because ‘such slogans often form cornerstones in the rhetoric of very different campaigns, seductively inviting approval and consensus’. Partnership, as a term, is particularly prone to imprecise usage, having ‘an elastic meaning’ (Vincent 1993:230), which allows it to be used as ‘a contemporary salvation theme’ (Popkewitz 2002:122). It must be, therefore, as McKay
and Garrett (2013:735) described it, an ‘ongoing concern’ of studies of parental involvement policies to address whether such policies lead to authentic partnership or are merely ‘masquerade’.

Inversely, ‘loose’ language use can allow what McLaughlin (1991, cited by Ball 1997b:261) described as ‘re-orientation change’, where ‘organisations absorb the language of reform but not its substance’. A similar point was made by Hoyle and Wallace (2007:19) who discussed how teachers in the UK practice ‘principled infidelity’ to managerial demands by ‘working around’ policies and structures when they deem that professionally appropriate. Recontextualisation of dominant discourses, as well as recontextualisation by dominant discourses is relevant, therefore, when the issue of persuasive language use is being considered.

2.3.3.2 School effectiveness/attainments

Managerial constructions of teacher professionalism entered the educational sphere as policy-makers sought to reform education in light of the need to ensure that pupils were prepared for the modern day realities of a technological society and globalised international competition. The ultimate purpose of education from a managerial perspective relates to maintaining national or supra-national economic competitiveness (cf. Mahony & Moos 1998:303, regarding England), with an ‘increasing neglect or side-lining (other than in rhetoric) of the social purposes of education’ (Ball 2008:1/2). This results in a narrow conception of school effectiveness, centring on pupil attainments in standardised testing. Managerial notions of school effectiveness are often laden with what MacBeath (2012:49) described as ‘the tough commercial language of targets, standards, measures, value-added and accountability’. Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:348) discussed how such externally imposed standards can be used as regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic controls over teachers. The focus on attainment as the main measure of school effectiveness leads to instrumental, product-driven approaches to parental involvement and risks creating greater professional insecurity among teachers, thereby reducing their willingness to engage with parents.

The ‘hunting’ of parents ‘as extra help to ensure that their child is pushed’ (McNamara, Hustler, Stronach, Rodrigo, Beresford & Botcherby 2000:480) tends to ignore the holistic benefits of parental involvement (Brain & Reid 2003:294; Brien & Stelmach 2009:10), in favour of the contribution parental involvement makes to raising test scores. This is despite evidence that the connection between parental involvement in schools and increased pupil attainment is actually quite complicated (cf. inter alia Desimone 1999; Harris & Goodall 2008; Lee, Kushner & Cho 2007; Edwards & Warin 1999; Deslandes & Cloutier 2002; Hartas 2015). Such an approach also disregards findings that ‘citizens when consulted would prefer broader school goals than those mediated by tests’ (Coleman 1987, cited by Borg & Mayo 2001:247; Munn 1991:180). The over-simplification of pupil achievement, and consequently, of teaching, inherent in the instrumental model challenges teacher professional identity, particularly in low trust or market settings. Paradoxically a reliance on
complicated performance indicators may, however, strengthen the notion of teacher-as-expert, if parents find the technical jargon inaccessible (Munn 1998:392).

If parental involvement is conceptualised as an instrument for raising attainment, it is likely to be product rather than process driven. This product focus may conflict with the creation of long-term improved relations between parents and teachers. For instance, Miretzky (2001:841) suggested that a ‘narrow focus on student outcomes is one of the main impediments to increased investment in the parent-teacher relationship’, as relationships with parents can become to be seen as a distraction from more direct forms of teaching and learning. Both Edwards and Warin (1999) and Brain and Reid (2003) reported this effect in their UK studies, the latter (p303) noting: ‘the drive to improve standards simply drove out the wider inclusion dimensions of parental involvement’. A product focus is most likely to have a restraining impact in situations where achieving the involvement of parents is challenging and time-consuming, such as in disadvantaged areas or with minority ethnicity families (Crozier & Davies 2007:306). The untidy and long-term process of creating sustainable relationships between parents and teachers does not, therefore, suit the ‘audit culture’ (Colley et al. 2007:175) of managerial professionalism.

2.3.3.3. Legislative, standards approach

In line with a narrow, standards-based approach to school effectiveness, constructs of managerial teacher professionalism tend towards regulation, prescription and centralisation, even if this process is often couched in the language of devolution, autonomy and decentralisation. Knight, Lingard & Porter (1993:4) referred to this as ‘loose-tight’ coupling, while Ball (2008:43) described ‘reregulation’ and du Gay (1996, cited by Ball 2008:43) called it ‘controlled de-control’. Legislation, rules and formal bureaucratic procedures are important features of managerialism. A legislative approach to parent-teacher relations is constrained by the difficulties in framing legislation to account for interpersonal relations, the negative effect that overly prescriptive approaches have on trusting relationships, and the consideration that the most easily mandated parental involvement is not necessarily the most meaningful. However, legislative requirements do serve to focus attention on issues relating to parental involvement, and may clarify expectations of and for parents and teachers in useful ways.

Although legislation can be effective from policy-makers’ perspectives (cf. Webb et al. 2004:102), legislative approaches to solving any problem are by their nature constrained; ‘effective decentralized governance….cannot be implemented merely with the stroke of a legislator’s pen’ (Macmillan 1998:2, citing Bullock & Thomas 1997). Even Webster (2004:118), who drafted some of the state legislation required by No Child Left Behind (2001) in Minnesota and Louisiana, acknowledged the argument that ‘there is no true ideal that can be legislated for in an equitable manner’. Given that parent-teacher relations are ultimately based on the interpersonal relationships between individuals, legislative limitations in accounting for human nature are particularly relevant.
There is widespread agreement in the literature that ‘it is not easy to formulate a legislative framework of parental participation that fits every school’ (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:589). Since certain types of parental involvement are easier to legislate for and monitor, more attention is likely to be paid to them, regardless of educational benefits, if standardisation and control are the priority. While legislation most usually focuses on school and teacher responsibilities towards parents, and so regulates teachers, the inverse also applies, in that parental involvement legislation also regulates parents (Brien & Stelmach 2009; Hood 2001). Brien and Stelmach (2009:4) were among those who noted that while legislating for parental roles appears to ‘have a democratizing force by ensuring that all parents have a right to participate .....’, by not adequately addressing the myriad of factors that influence parents’ involvement, legislation, no matter how well intentioned, can have ‘de-privileging, marginalizing and disempowering effects’.

The central role that trust must play in relationships between parents and teachers makes attempts to enforce good relations through legislation all the more problematic, given that ‘the greater the governance by rules, the less the practice of trust’ (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002:345). An ‘excessive elaboration of rules and a lack of flexibility in their application’, communicates distrust to those to whom they are directed, by assuming that people are not genuinely committed to fulfilling their responsibilities (Tschannen-Moran 2009: 223) This relationship between legislation and distrust may explain findings such as those of Cullingford (1996, cited by Cullingford & Morrison 1999:260) in the United Kingdom, that ‘all the legislation about parental rights seems to have had the opposite effect to that intended’.

Mandated parental involvement does not necessarily lead to meaningful parental involvement, even when the requirements of the legislation are observed. For instance, parental participation in school governance bodies is a type of parental involvement that is relatively easy to mandate and monitor, and there has been a widespread interest in it internationally. However, ‘creating a legal space for parents to be part of school decision-making does not necessarily mean that parents will see that space in the same light’ (Brien & Stelmach 2009:7). Since ‘presence and representation do not mean parents and educators necessarily work well together or equally share decision-making’ (Borg & Mayo 2001:248), this demonstrates an important constraint of legislative provisions. The limits of legislation that are apparent in relation to formal and structured types of parental involvement are likely to be all the more relevant when more informal parent-teacher interactions are considered, given how difficult it is to effectively mandate and evaluate the latter.

Notwithstanding the above, since there is little evidence that widespread parent-teacher partnership has developed in the absence of legislation, it would be inappropriate to ignore the need for some form of legal encouragement for parental involvement in schools. For instance, Davis (2004) noted that despite its limitations, the No Child Left Behind legislation in the United States did at least focus attention on issues relating to parental involvement. Ranson et al. (2005:368) found in the United Kingdom, that while parent governors took on some of the approaches of the performativity
agenda, they also governed schools in ways that were ‘independent of the state and reflect local
cultural traditions of governing education’; thus, becoming ‘active citizens’. Therefore, even when
legislation is very prescriptive, the implementation of it may allow for more democratic and
responsive forms of parental involvement to emerge, which would have been unlikely in the absence
of the impetus provided by the need to fulfil the legislative requirements.

A potential benefit of legislative approaches can also be identified when the clarity with which
legislation pronounces its expectations of both teachers and parents is considered. In situations where
expectations are unstated or implicit, those who lack access to ‘privileged knowledge’ are not easily
able to interpret them and, therefore, are disadvantaged (Crozier & Davies 2007:301). The making of
‘power and responsibility explicit’ can give parents a consciousness of their duties towards their
children of which they might otherwise be unaware (Sykes 2001:274). The fact that a lack of
information about parental involvement possibilities has been frequently identified as a major
impediment to greater parental involvement in schools strengthens this argument (inter alia Karlson
2002; Pena 2000; Goldring & Phillips 2008:214). The tendency of managerialism to use language to
obfuscate meaning does undermine this point somewhat, however.

2.3.3.4 Accountability and performativity

Managerial professionalism is characterised by a drive for greater accountability from all
public sector workers (cf. Avis 2005), often accompanied by what Skilling (2014:61) described as ‘a
narrative of constant crisis’ to emphasise the need for accountability and reform. Ball (2008:49)
described performativity as ‘a culture or system of “terror” involving “a regime of accountability that
employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of control, attrition and change’.
Since teachers are seen in public discourse to be accountable to parents in the first instance, this influences
the development of parent-teacher relations, creating relationships of high surveillance but low trust,
assuming that teachers areextrinsically motivated, reducing teacher availability to parents because of
bureaucratic accountability demands, and introducing a ‘public relations’ element into parental
involvement in schools. While the full ‘terror’ of performativity may not yet be in place in Ireland (cf.
Wall 2014), positioning the public sector as problematic and in need of mechanisms to ensure
productivity has been noted as a feature of Irish government and media discourse (cf. Murphy 2010).

The understanding that parental involvement has a role in increasing school accountability and
in raising educational standards casts parents as ‘moral and educational policemen’ (Cullingford &
Morrison 1999:260), who must engage in ‘oversight and checking’ (Bauch & Goldring 1998:27) of
the work of teachers. Of itself, the objective of ensuring that teachers and schools are providing the
best possible education to all children is of course laudable, and attempting to harness parental
involvement as a way of achieving this aim appears sensible (cf. Cochren & Yager 2001:31).
However, a perceived need for high surveillance assumes low trust of teachers (Mahony & Hextall
2000:102; Webb et al. 2004:86). A sense of not being trusted is likely to make teachers wary and
defensive. Therefore, the ‘parents-as-police’ model foregrounds negativity in the parent-teacher relationship, and is viewed with distaste by teachers, who are very unhappy about ‘continuously being criticised and called to account’ (Crozier 1999:324) by parents who may not understand the complex professional contexts in which teachers operate, nor understand the ‘loose coupling’ (Forster 1999:176) between effective teaching and actual learning. A sense of being ‘policed’ presents a particular dilemma for teachers in contending with the potential conflict between the ‘particularistic’ interest of parents and the ‘universalistic’ interest of teachers (Tveit 2009:289; Jowett, Baginsky & MacDonald MacNeil 1991:68; McNamara et al. 2000:474).

Linking parental involvement to the accountability agenda assumes that extrinsic motivation is of great importance for good teaching. It is not denied that extrinsic motivation has some part to play in some teachers’ work, and being held to account by parents may have a beneficial effect on teaching in some circumstances, so long as the teacher’s professional judgement is not interfered with. Nevertheless, it has been frequently found that teachers are more motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic concerns (cf. Hoyle 2001; Locke et al. 2005; Belogolovsky & Somech 2010:920). Extrinsic motivation alone has limited effect on teaching in the long-term as ‘achievement in the end is engendered and sustained by an inner drive to improve’, (Ranson et al. 2003:730). Furthermore, Bauch and Goldring (2000:6) referred to ‘considerable evidence’ that it is improving teachers’ working conditions that is important for teacher commitment, motivation and productivity. Therefore, imagining that providing parents with opportunities to monitor teachers’ work will automatically improve teaching and learning is likely to be over-simplistic and, indeed, to have negative consequences for parent-teacher relations.

The mundane everyday demands of the accountability agenda can have a negative effect on parent-teacher relationships, if teachers become ‘too harassed to respond’ to parents, as Cullingford and Morrison (1999:259) found in the United Kingdom. Ball (2003:221, citing Elliot 1996:15) described how the effort to comply with the performativity agenda ‘consumes so much energy that it drastically reduces the energy available for making improvement inputs’. Ironically, an emphasis on accountability procedures can hinder genuine accountability, if paperwork causes time pressures that reduce time available for consultation with others (cf. Dickson, Halpin, Power, Telford, Whitty & Gewirtz 2001:179; Din 1997:18) Moreover, while bureaucratic procedures have advantages in terms of standardising resource allocation, they promote a ‘compliance mentality’, which can ‘ignore, discourage and even sanction creativity, risk-taking and inventiveness’ (Feuerstein 2002:21, citing Zeibarth 1999:3). This compliance mentality results in teachers becoming dependent on the ‘coercive over-specification of job elements’ (Tschanen-Moran, 2009:222); consequently, they are unlikely to risk creative engagement with parents. While the accountability agenda is not yet as demanding of Irish teachers as it is of their international counterparts (Sugrue 2011:71), it is reasonable to assume that increasing their paper-based workload would reduce their availability to parents just as it did to their colleagues in England, Wales and elsewhere.
While an emphasis on accountability to parents is supposed to ensure high standards, it may actually result in teachers becoming concerned with public relations, so as to present the best image of the school to the parents. For instance, Munn (1997, cited by Brook & Hancock 2000:260) wrote of schools ‘sharpening their image’ in response to the accountability agenda, while Walker (1998:171) discussed parent-teacher meetings in the UK that were seen by teachers as ‘a public relations exercise to fulfil schools’ obligations of accountability’. Since parents have to be aware of the school’s weaknesses if they are to make useful contributions, only allowing parents access to an edited image of the school reality precludes them from any involvement in contentious or problematic decision-making. Hence, too much emphasis on accountability may actually result in less transparency, if schools aim to provide the account that is most flattering to themselves. Even Forster (1999:183) who was optimistic about the potential of responsive accountability, noted in the context of the School Accountability and Improvement Initiative of the Department of Education in New South Wales, that it was likely that school staffs ‘will regard the holding-to-account functions of the report as paramount and that the potential of the report for building partnership and developing the school community will not be realised’.

From a contrary perspective, Nuttman-Schwartz and Shay (1999:124) made the interesting observation that an objection to schools engaging in marketing is actually ‘rooted in a patronising attitude towards the client’ as it implies that people are unable to judge for themselves. Therefore, a school’s engagement with marketing and public relations objectives may not be as negative as is sometimes assumed, particularly in the present era, where advertising is ubiquitous. Advertising may have an educational function, and if an understanding of public relations results in teachers interacting pleasantly with parents and taking pride in their teaching, this can be advantageous. Despite this possibility, however, inherent contradictions remain between the values and codes of professions such as teaching, and those of the public relations and marketing industries.

2.3.3.5 Measurability

If commercial notions such as standards and targets are seen to underpin school effectiveness, then the measuring of achievement becomes crucial in order to provide a system through which schools and teachers can be held accountable. The emphasis on measurement in managerial systems can be such, as Wrigley (2003:90) noted, that there is a danger of the attitude that ‘what cannot be measured simply does not count’ developing. Lingard (2010:135) made a related point about the ‘implicit danger’ of ‘measuring what is easy to measure rather than what is significant’. Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:347) described the ‘meta-performativity’ that can arise from an audit culture, where ‘standards are met for their own sake, whether they are appropriate and ethical or not’. A similar description of how the rubric can become more important than that which is being measured was provided by Long (2008:124). Success rather than effort is valued, with teachers, students and
leaders framed as ‘winners or losers in what is now a highly competitive game’ (Blackmore, 2010:101). Such a context has consequences for parent–teacher relations.

Research has found that it is very difficult to adequately measure parental involvement in schools in a meaningful sense (cf. Bakker & Denesson 2007:193) as much parental involvement is based on a ‘subjectively expressed individual perception’ (Cankar et al. 2009:16). Indeed, Topping (1996, cited by Edwards & Warin 1999:328) described the evaluation of parental involvement programmes as ‘a quagmire’. Conclusive evaluation is also hindered by the ever changing and continuous nature of parental involvement in a school (Bauch 2001:217). Consequently, the accountability agenda of managerial professionalism, even as it emphasises the importance of parental involvement, may result in teachers prioritising the more quantifiable aspects of the school which they can then successfully report to parents, rather than the more complicated issue of parental involvement itself.

Furthermore ‘data based accountability’ (Sanders 2008:532) can lead to a narrowing of the definition of parental involvement, with more measurable types coming to the fore. For example, Edwards and Warin (1999:332) found that in the initiative they examined, a sense of accountability being ‘unavoidable’ resulted in a focus on ‘getting the parents in’ becoming the foremost concern of most schools. Similarly, Azaola (2011:4) commented on how teachers tend to be more concerned with quantity rather than the quality of parental involvement. This suggests that the measurability agenda would be likely to encourage the more regulated and recordable forms of parental involvement, at the expense of those forms that are less easily monitored by schools.

### 2.3.3.6 School choice, market model

School choice and the market model of school provision is a major preoccupation of many systems that espouse a managerial discourse of teacher professionalism, as it is through school choice that the rewards or sanctions of managerialism are ultimately applied (cf. Forster 1999; Munn 1991; Vincent & Tomlinson 1997:364). The importance of this discursive strand is indicated by the large amount of literature that addresses it. Market models of school provision position parents as consumers, although this over-simplifies the complexities of school choice. While school choice is sometimes presented as parental involvement in action, it may actually limit meaningful parental involvement in schools, as well as causing teachers to be less likely to take risks or hazard non-conformity. It also has implications in terms of creating competition among families for sought-after school places. The full extent of the model does not seem to apply yet to Ireland, however.

Arising from the market model of schooling is the notion of the ‘good parent’ being like a ‘good consumer’. Much reference is made in the literature to this managerial idea of parent as consumer (cf. inter alia Borg & Mayo 2001:205; Bowe et al. 1994:66; Blackledge 1995:312; Morgan & Fraser 1993:43; Vincent 1993:229). Vincent (1996a:465) stated that parental empowerment was equated to ‘parent-as-consumer’ in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Bowe et al.
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al. (1994:68) this is a palatable image for many people, as the ‘ideology of the market’ has such a strong historical presence that it makes the idea of the ‘good parent’ being like the good consumer quite easy for people to accept. Much of the quality control elements of managerialism are explained as being necessary to allow parents to inform themselves and make choices about schools, as they ‘shop around’ (Forster 1999:180) for the best school. Its simplicity as an analogy also makes it attractive, as according to Bowe et al. (1994:69) it allows for the neat division of parents into ‘choosers’ and ‘non-choosers’. The appeal of the school choice model was illustrated, for example, by Kosunen (2014) who described the anxiety of Finnish parents about choosing schools for their children, despite the risks of making a ‘bad’ choice being low in Finland, due to relative parity between schools and the absence of educational dead-ends in the system.

Despite its attractiveness, however, the notion of parent as consumer over-simplifies the process and implications of school choice. Bowe et al. (1994:67) discussed the difficulty of making accurate comparisons between different schools. Parents do not always act logically or rationally when choosing schools (cf. Reay 1996:585; Smrekar 1992:26) and, indeed, Bloomfield Cucchiara and McNamara Horvat (2014) noted how school choice can be about more than the search for the ‘best’ school, as sometimes it forms part of an articulation of parental identity. The factors most influential to parent choice, such as location and composition of intake, are often not within the control of the school (Munn 1991:179; Goldring & Phillips 2007:228). As Forster (1999:181) noted, parents cannot ‘try out’ schools in the same way as they might household products. The ‘bandwagon effects’ of school choice (Adler 1997:298, citing Simon 1957) also illustrate this over-simplification, as once schools lose their good reputations, they often find it extremely difficult to regain them, even when their problems have been resolved.

Proponents of school choice generally present it as being beneficial for parental involvement. For instance, ‘giving parents a greater role......in shaping school policy’ is cited as an aim of the school choice movement (Adler 1997:303), while Bauch and Goldring (2000:3) argued that if parents choose their children’s schools there is likely to be a greater ‘fit’ between the home and the school and, hence, good parent-teacher relationships are more likely. On the contrary, however, Forster (1999:181) stated that a market or consumer model of educational provision is ‘an impoverished accountability and an emaciated form of relationship between parent and school’. Parental involvement in school choice may serve to limit parental involvement in schools, as the exercise of choice is seen to negate the need for any further parental involvement in the child’s education. This is illustrated in the literature with reference to fee-paying schools, which in many cases do not demonstrate the high levels of parental involvement that might be expected of them (cf. Xu & Gulosino 2006:363). Rather the assumption often is that parents will be satisfied with the practices and procedures of the school, given that they have chosen to pay for them, and if not then they have the choice to send their children elsewhere (Forster 1999:180). Choice, therefore, hinders rather than helps parent-teacher relations in this regard.
The minimisation of risk is a feature of managerialism (Mockler 2005:742), and the market model of school choice reinforces this risk aversion, as teachers are afraid to do anything that might jeopardise their school’s reputation in the eyes of parents. Since parents are likely to have more traditionalist approaches to education, this can make schools ‘more conservative and throttle innovation’ (Adler 1997:304; also Reay 1996:583). Similarly, the rivalry that occurs between schools in market systems can be reflected within schools as well, as individual teachers try to ensure that they avoid blame for any weakness the school may have, leading to a competitive rather than collaborative ethos. ‘Non-conformity’ is likely to be perceived as dangerous, particularly for teachers who are interested in advancing their careers (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002:351). Therefore, teachers are likely to revert to what they believe to be the tried and tested ways of doing things, which given the traditional model of parent-teacher relations, is unlikely to involve parents to any great extent. This results in ‘individualism or atomisation, whereby educational institutions and agents are viewed as isolated and distinct elements, with little or no recognition of how they can also comprise larger systems or structures…’ (Clarke 2012:301). Likewise, Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:351) described how ‘under managerialist conditions a cult of individualism…..has the possibility to re-inflect the occupational culture’. Such individualism would be unlikely to foster good parent-teacher relations. It is arguably of particular concern in the context of Irish primary education, where teacher isolation and the need for greater collegiality and co-operation among teachers have been identified in the past (cf. Charting our Education Future, 1995:130).

The creation of competition between schools also creates competition among pupils and parents for entry into the ‘best’ schools. This has un-egalitarian consequences, given that some families are more competitive than others (cf. inter alia Crozier & Davies 2006; Forster 1999:180; Harris and Goodall 2008:279; Vincent & Tomlinson 1997:363). Adler’s (1997:303) comment about the ‘rugged individualism associated with neo-liberal ideology’ is relevant in this regard as school choice implies a very individualistic approach to parental involvement (Munn 1998:380). While school choice is generally regarded as a feature of imposed managerialism, Ravead and van Zanten (2007:109) found it also to be ‘a bottom-up process’, as the parents best placed to compete for school places are often eager to do so, so reinforcing an individualist approach to parental involvement. James Vowden (2012), for instance, discussed the ‘self-exclusionary’ behaviour of middle-class parents in London in this regard. Despite the individualistic approach, however, normative frameworks are likely to play a role in influencing school choice, making certain choices more legitimate than others (Raveaud & van Zanten 2007:109); hence, leading to the ‘bandwagon’ effects mentioned above. Proponents of parental involvement on the basis of school choice ignore that ‘markets are not instruments of democratic decision-making’ because they are ‘designed to differentially distribute goods based on the strength of the consumer’s desire or ability to pay’ (Covaleskie 2007:40). Exley (2013) discussed the difficulties in overcoming this inequality, even
when, as in England, deliberate attempts were made to improve the choice making capacity of working-class parents through the appointment of ‘Choice Advisors’.

The publication of a league table of the ‘top’ secondary schools in Ireland in the *Irish Times* and *Sunday Times* each year and a growing interest in the notion of certain schools being university feeder schools (cf. Borooah, Dineen & Lynch 2010), as well as the decision of the Department of Education to publish Whole-School Evaluation reports online, indicates that the school choice argument is gaining momentum in Ireland. However, it does not yet appear to be influential, especially at primary level, to the same extent as in England or the United States (Buchanan & Fox 2008). Admittedly there may be a difference between perceptions of school choice in urban and rural areas, as in the latter Church affiliation, GAA membership, family connections and transport issues often encourage parents towards the local primary school (Buchanan & Fox 2008:274). In general, however, much of the scramble for primary school places in Ireland in recent years can be attributed to a lack of places in geographically suitable areas, more so than resulting from a market view of education.

**2.3.3.7 Financial efficiency**  
Mahony and Moos (1998:303) noted how the need to reduce public expenditure and to increase the efficiency of the public sector have accompanied the school effectiveness agenda as drivers of educational reform. These imperatives are very familiar to Irish teachers at the present time. Consequently, managerial approaches to teacher professionalism are often preoccupied with efficiency in terms of financial resources. While the connection between financial matters and parental involvement may not be immediately apparent, (except perhaps in relation to school choice) associations between financial concerns and parent-teacher relationships have been identified in the literature. The priority given to financial considerations in managerial systems can affect parent-teacher relations, both directly through initiatives that reward parental involvement in schools with funding, and more indirectly by encouraging parental involvement in fundraising.

Access to funding is often used as a reward for schools who implement managerial policies, in keeping with notions of schooling in an educational ‘marketplace’ (Goldring & Phillips 2008; Lam 2006:174; Ball 2009). This is most obvious in relation to school choice where funding is tied to pupil numbers and, therefore, schools are rewarded or punished financially depending on the choices of parents. The *Title I* aspect of the *Goals 2000* programme in the United States, where schools had to develop ‘partnerships’ with parents in order to qualify for and maintain funding (Epstein 1995:701), provides an example of schools being financially incentivised to involve parents. While this mechanism may serve to increase parental involvement in schools, it does little to improve the underlying parent-teacher relationship, and may in fact create resentment if teachers perceive that their schools are being financially penalised due to the decisions or actions of parents.

Financial matters can affect parental involvement less directly also. Nakagawa (2000:453) explained how funding reductions can be justified through an emphasis on the importance of parental
involvement, if parental involvement rather than resourcing are credited as being of most significance to school success. She also noted that the volunteer labour of parents may be used to decrease the financial needs of schools. The devolution of control over the school budget to a local or school level may be presented as a way of giving parents or teachers more say in what the priorities of the school are, but may conceal or distract from an overall reduction in funding for the school (Nir 2007:431/2), as arguably has occurred in Ireland in recent years (e.g. DES Circular 0040/2009, Clarification regarding Legitimate Use of Capitation Funding). Interestingly, Goldring and Shapira (1993:402) made an association between the cutting of school budgets and parental empowerment, in that parents were then expected to fundraise to fill the gaps and, consequently, gained a voice in schools because of their provision of funding. However, this latter point does not seem generalisable to Ireland, as parent empowerment is not a consequence of the widespread need many Irish schools have for parental fundraising (cf. Bleach 2010), except perhaps in relation to the fundraising initiatives themselves.

Ranson (2012:35) identified how the managerial interest in efficiency may also serve to reduce parental involvement in school management bodies, if an executive board of governors is deemed more effective than a board comprising democratically elected parent and community representatives who may lack the necessary corporate skills; ‘it has become unreasonable to operate multi-million pound businesses on the basis of people helping out’. While this might suggest a return to a distanced professional model, echoing traditional constructions, in this version it is corporate and business people who are the distanced professional experts, rather than teachers.

2.3.3.8 School-based management, adversarial democracy

The devolution of school management functions to local boards is characteristic of managerial approaches to education; hence, the school-based management initiatives and devolution of power occurring internationally (cf. inter alia Beck & Murphy 1999; Lam 2006; Nir 2007; Heystek 2006; Chikoko 2008; Stelmach & Preston 2008; Borg & Mayo 2001). Parents and teachers usually have a role on these boards, although their constitution and function vary from context to context. They form a central part of the rhetoric of managerialism, which prioritises democracy, participation, parent empowerment, accountability, responsiveness, etc. However, as discussed in Section 2.3.3.3, the extent to which these formal roles actually empower parents in school decision-making is debatable and variable as parent empowerment is usually a much more complex objective than managerial constructs allow (cf. Kelley-Laine 1998:344). The adversarial democracy that is a feature of managerially inspired school management structures serve to construct parental involvement in ways that are not as democratic or empowering as the rhetoric suggests. Additionally, parental unwillingness, or inability, to involve themselves in school management structures further lessens their democratic potential.
According to Feuerstein (2002:26-31) adversarial democracy places an immediate value on voting, leading to an individualistic view of society, as there is no attempt made to define the common good, but rather the wishes of individuals are paramount and decision makers react accordingly, to ensure their re-election. Vincent (1997:274) described the implications of this for parental involvement in the United Kingdom, where there is only occasional participation by most of the parent body in the democratic process (at election time), short term approaches are taken to decision-making, powerful parents are able to influence the system to suit their own children, (or head teachers may retain control of decision-making) and certain parents are almost entirely excluded from the process. The apparent fairness of the democratic electoral process hides the fact that ‘certain groups have not got the time, resources or confidence to seek election’ (Drudy & Lynch 1993:127). Despite these shortcomings, the presence of democratic processes and structures validates the objectives of policy-makers who can claim that particular initiatives are what the parents or teachers want. Hence, there is a powerful mechanism through which to suppress opposition, as ‘the cloak of democracy will bring further legitimation to the education system, no matter how unrepresentative the representative body may be’ (Drudy & Lynch 1993:127). As Munn (1991:80, citing McPherson 1989) explained; ‘devolution of school management need not mean any lessening of central control’.

That only a very limited number of parents are involved in school management structures is a point that occurs frequently in the literature (inter alia Cullingford & Morrison 1999:258; Dom & Verhoeven 2006:593; Morgan & Fraser 1993:44), as does the point that it can be very difficult to encourage people to become involved in school policy-making (Dickson et al. 2001:179; Gay & Place 2000:13). Despite the greater role given to parents in schools and, indeed, the more explicit expectations that parents will get involved, it would appear that even in managerial education systems, most parents are not all that interested in involvement that does not relate directly to their own child. The low participation rates may be indicative of the ‘top-down’ nature of managerial constructions of parental involvement, with little demand for greater parental involvement coming from either parents or teachers in some contexts (cf. Kristoffersson 2009:37, regarding Sweden; MacGiollaPhádraig 2003a:43, regarding Ireland). It may also reflect the time demands of participation in school management structures (Macmillan 1998:12) and, also, the burdens that such involvement places on volunteers, who are in many ways more vulnerable than school employees (Stelmach & Preston 2008:71). Arguably this absence of parental involvement is not a priority concern of managerial systems if the achievement of policy-makers’ goals is the motivation for devolved decision-making in the first place, rather than the actual participation of stakeholders.

Notwithstanding the above, it is notable also that some commentators have contradicted the shortcomings of parental participation in school management structures. For example, Ranson et al. (2005:361) concluded that volunteer participation in school management structures in the United Kingdom has been ‘a considerable though not complete success’, as while parents were initially ‘encouraged’ to volunteer by principals, many of them did subsequently develop a ‘growing
understanding of and commitment to the needs of the institution and the wider community’ (also Ranson et al. 2003:721). Regardless of the debate about the extent of parental enthusiasm, however, the limitations of adversarial democratic structures remain pertinent.

Given the uniquely localised and church-based management structure of Irish primary schools historically (cf. Raftery 2009), and the influence that had on the establishment of the Boards of Management in 1975, issues relating to managerial devolution may not apply to the same extent in Ireland as elsewhere. However, parallels can be drawn between Irish Boards of Management, and the experiences of school-based decision bodies in other contexts in terms of parental involvement in schools. Hanafin and Lynch (2002:43), for instance, discussed the restricted influence of parent members on Irish Boards of Management. The lack of parental participation in formal school structures appears as relevant in Ireland as in other contexts (cf. Byrne & Smith 2010:147; Hanafin & Lynch 2002:38).

2.3.4 Implications of managerial teacher professionalism for parent-teacher relations.

Managerial understandings of school effectiveness, the use of legislative and standards-based approaches, an emphasis on teacher accountability, the market model of schooling, concerns about financial efficiency and the promotion of adversarial democracy have a variety of implications for parent-teacher relations in schools, as discussed above. They act to position parents and teachers in particular ways in relation to each other, and so power relations and the class-based positioning of parents in managerial constructs of parent-teacher relations are considered below.

2.3.4.1 Power relations between parents and teachers

The notion of ‘parent-as-police’, the emphasis on teacher accountability, and the prioritisation of parental choice of school, places parents in a powerful position in relation to teachers, particularly when compared to their power position in the traditional model of parent-teacher relations. Parental empowerment forms a central part of the rhetoric surrounding managerial reform of education. However, while such empowerment may be limited by parents’ own behaviours, it can also be argued that it only extends to the achievement of policy-makers goals, and that, therefore, both parents and teachers are powerless in the face of managerial educational objectives.

Rhetoric of parent empowerment

Many of the characteristics of managerialism outlined in Section 2.3.3 above are directly concerned with increasing parental empowerment. For instance, the monitoring and policing role explicitly assigned to parents in some versions of managerialism (cf. Donnelly 1999:238 regarding Northern Ireland) is a considerable source of power for parents. School choice can be understood as ‘putting power in the hands of parents’ (Adler 1997:307). In market models, teachers’ power is likely to be constrained by their need to keep parents satisfied, as well as expectations that teachers must always behave in a professional manner, whereas parents, who do not have the same professional and
legal obligations, have more freedom of expression and behaviour (Vincent 1996a:467). If teachers are viewed as providing a service to ‘consumer’ parents (particularly in fee paying schools) then parents are likely to be more powerful (Hobbins McGrath 2007:1416). Birenbaum-Carmeli’s (1999) report of how parents took over the running of a school in Israel is a particularly dramatic example of teacher powerlessness in a parent dominated system; similarly, Heystek (2006:480) referred to parents dominating the relationship in some parts of rural South Africa. It is notable that the political and cultural contexts of education in Israel and South Africa are quite dissimilar to those elsewhere, and perhaps, therefore, these examples are not widely generalisable. However, in general, managerial constructs of parent-teacher relations tend to construe parents as being far more powerful in the relationship than in traditional constructs.

Notwithstanding this, parental empowerment is unlikely to apply equally across the parent body, as social class has been found to have an important influence on whether individual parents are ‘empowered’ in managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations or not. Brien and Stelmach (2009:6) argued that mandating parental involvement has increased the sense of entitlement of the middle-classes towards involvement, but that the working-classes are less likely to respond. This has had the effect of further empowering the already powerful. It may result in the disempowerment of working-class and minority ethnicity parents as ‘empowerment for some is no empowerment at all’ (Blackledge 1995:315), a point also made by Birenbaum-Carmeli (1999:63/64), who noted that limited empowerment may lead to ‘the oppression of weaker groups and individuals’.

Limited empowerment in actuality

Even for those parents who are able to and do respond to the rhetoric of parental empowerment, however, the actual empowerment envisaged for parents in managerial systems is often of a limited type, as usually it is not in the interests of policy-makers to encourage challenge to the status quo. For instance, Macfarlane (2008:704/705) described how parents in Queensland are expected to be active and engaged with school decisions and policy, but at the same time be ‘inexpert and unleaderly’ as it is not deemed ‘proper’ for them to challenge the ‘dominant view of society’ and schooling. In this way their involvement is ‘framed’ and ‘qualified’ by the governing authorities. The limits of parental empowerment were summarised by Borg and Mayo (2001:256, citing Mayo 1999:3) when they noted that for many parents the participatory experience often centres on little else apart from ‘tea, toilet and towel issues’, despite the emancipatory rhetoric. Limited forms of parental empowerment in managerial contexts support Clarke and Newman’s (1997:140) contention that managerialism involves both ‘a dispersal and concentration of power’.

Moreover, the objective of empowering parents may only extend to parents who act in accordance with policy-makers’ goals (Munn 1991:182). The thrust of managerial parental involvement involves the ‘enlisting’ of ‘parents as agents of the school’ (Edwards & Warin 1999:332), and ultimately as agents of the policy-makers themselves. Crozier (1999:316) discussed how ‘This
expectation of involvement is located within the discourses of participatory democracy, the stakeholder society and citizenship......but the motivation for this expectation may be driven less by egalitarianism and more by a desire to exert control’. Spencer (2001), using the case of school council policy in Alberta and Ontario, demonstrated how citizens can be ‘seduced’ to advance state goals and agendas. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Vincent (1993:228) noted how the use of co-option can be a powerful mechanism to achieve policy aspirations – ‘moves to introduce participatory processes are often motivated by a wish to legitimate the more general action of the institution concerned’, a point echoed by Hodge and Runswick Cole (2008:642) when they noted that ‘collective agreement’ can be a powerful conspiracy. Vincent and Tomlinson (1997:366) found that ‘warm references to consensus and collegiality’ can hide an ‘implicit marginalising and controlling of parents’. In the Irish context, the inclusion in Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure (DES 2011) of sample questions that parent members on the Board of Management might ask at meetings in relation to standardised test results, is a notable example of parents being ‘empowered’ to advance policy-makers priorities. The ‘enlisting’ of parents explains why managerial constructs of the parent-teacher relationship are so difficult to effectively oppose, as the sense that ‘parents’ want particular reforms is a powerful way to legitimate policy, even in the absence of evidence that parents do in fact desire those changes (cf. Coldron & Boulton 1996:53)

Also, in the market model of schooling that is characteristic of managerialism, the power of the individual parent ultimately derives from their capacity to remove their children from school (Vincent 1993:230, citing Hirschmann 1970). Given the complexities involved in disrupting children’s education, (and the minor effect the removal of a small number of children has, especially in a big school) this is a very limited instrument. Furthermore, given the competition that can exist between parents for school places, it is likely that exit is a particularly unsatisfactory response for those parents and families who are not perceived as being valuable to schools. On the contrary, however, Karsten (2006:270) concluded that the provision of No Child Left Behind (2001) to allow parents remove their child from an underperforming school was ‘a big step in the direction of parental empowerment’. Presumably it is a big step if previously parents did not have this entitlement, but in the Irish context, where parents always had some freedom to move between schools, ‘exit’ does not appear inherently empowering.

Despite using the language of partnership and consensus (Mahony & Moos 1998) managerialism tends to make all participants powerless in the face of the standards agenda, quality controls and urgent demands for reform. Crozier (1999:324) suggested that educational reforms in the United Kingdom have ‘undermined the professionalism of teachers, contributed to low morale and put teachers on the defensive’, without actually giving parents ‘voice’ either, so both parents and teachers have been disempowered as result (also Walker 1998:171). Parents and teachers have been positioned in opposition to each other through a ‘discourse of derision’ (Ball 1998:126) about educational provision. Furthermore, in small countries or educational systems such as in Ireland, there is likely to
be an elite involved in policy-making that are often from similar backgrounds to each other, or are interconnected in some way and which may exclude others from real influence (Drudy & Lynch 1993:76). ‘Empowerment’, therefore, may mean different things in a managerial context than it would be assumed to mean elsewhere.

2.3.4.2 Positioning of parents as ‘good’ and ‘less good’ in managerial constructs

In common with traditional constructs of the parent-teacher relationship, as managerial discourses of parents and teachers construct teacher professional identity, they position parents in particular ways as well, through promulgating notions of the ideal parent. Parents are positioned, and position themselves, in response to these understandings of what it is to be a ‘good parent’. Middle-class parents tend to be more quickly positioned as ‘good’, in contrast to working-class parents who are often perceived as being less valuable to schools, and themselves in need of education. Moral panic about falling standards reinforces the notion of teacher-as-expert, and makes non-involvement in schools impossible for those who want to be regarded as ‘good parents’. The strength of the ‘good parent’ discourse may be such that it leads to symbolic involvement in schools by some parents, although the commitment of some policy-makers to parental involvement might also be symbolic.

As with any dominant discourse, if people accept and internalise the managerial idea of what a ‘good parent’ is, they will monitor themselves and others to ensure that they ‘fit’ within it (cf. Foucault 1980). According to Cullingford and Morrison (1999:254) in the United Kingdom, parents are constructed in two ways; as being on the government side, ‘charged, together with inspectors, in raising standards’, but also, being blamed along with teachers for crime and social problems, and so ‘targeted to fulfil their responsibilities’. Parents are viewed as ‘objects to be supported’ but also ‘subjects of improvement’ (McKay & Garrett 2013:734). This results in parents being placed in ‘a double bind’, potentially both problem and protector (Nakagawa 2000:448). As for traditional constructions, social class is important in deciding which of the roles particular parents are most likely to be assigned.

The competiveness inherent in managerial discourses of education is likely to construct some parents as being more valuable to schools and to the parent-teacher relationship, than other parents. Parents who have connections with business or financial interests, or who are affiliated with the governing political party, are likely to be more useful and attractive to schools than those who are not in or close to positions of power and influence (cf. Ranson et al. 2005:3670). As a strategy, Ranson et al. found this to be very successful, as having certain powerful parents on the governing body helped schools to get what they wanted or needed. While such an incentive is liable to greatly encourage school and teacher interest in involving parents in school decision-making and management structures, it does have drawbacks, not least among them a resulting tendency to exclude those parents, usually working-class or minority ethnicity, who do not appear to have anything to offer the school, or whose family ethos ‘at variance’ from that of the school (Hanafin & Lynch 2002:36). Notably, Hanafin and
Lynch drew on Irish research to discuss this point, and so it appears that the classification of parents as more/less valuable, however unconsciously, applies to Irish education as well.

The demands of the performativity agenda on schools tends to place working-class and minority ethnicity parents in an unenviable position in comparison with middle-class parents (Lareau 1989/2000). ‘Teachers’ expectations are coloured by the social and cultural experiences of certain intellectual and economic elites, where particular standards count, certain types of achievement are awarded and certain conventions are accepted’ (Baeck 2010:324). Baeck summarised this by describing schools as being ‘imprinted with the culture of the middle classes’. While this is true also of traditional discourses, the standards agenda is likely to have made these expectations all the more overt, regardless of the rhetoric of inclusion that accompanies it. This reinforces deficit approaches to those parents whose children are not achieving the standards required, albeit that it may no longer be appropriate to use deficit language when discussing these parents, with ‘difference’ now often the preferred term (Edwards & Warin 1999:327). It is working-class or minority parents who are often constructed as being to blame for societal ills, in public as well as educational discourse (cf. inter alia Azaola 2011:3; Braun, Vincent & Braun 2008:533; Giles 2006:283; Standing 1999a). The deficit approach to parents can result in a form of ‘social control’ then because it ‘implicitly invalidates parents as being capable of raising children on their own’ (Eurofound 2012:11). This allows the state to justify its intervention in home and family life. From a contrary perspective, discourses of ‘poor parenting’ can form part of what Robson (2010, cited by Hartas 2015) termed ‘familialization’ where responsibility for children’s welfare is regarded more of a family matter, vested in individual parents, than a concern of the state. In any event, whether viewed from the perspective of social control or familialisation, deficit positionings suit the state, as they allow it to distance itself from responsibility from social problems by attributing blame to parents (cf. Cullingford and Morrison 1999:254; Lareau & Shumar 1996:35; McNamara et al. 2000:480; Nakagawa 2000:451).

The parent education model from which the concept of parental involvement in schools developed initially remains pertinent but is accompanied by a sense of ‘moral panic’ (Vincent & Tomlinson 1997:362) in managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations. The ‘hysterical concern with falling standards’ results in certain parents and their children being construed as ‘objects for rehabilitation’ (Borg & Mayo 2001:245), with an emphasis on policies that ‘artificially tried to create parental attitudes and behaviours which seemed to spontaneously occur in white middle-class families’ (Bakker & Denessen 2007:188). While many of these attitudes and behaviours (such as reading to children, language development, etc.) are to be encouraged, the existence of good or defensible practices within working-class or minority cultures does not appear to be considered within the narrow restrictions of the ‘good parent’ ideal, whose principles are to be shared by everyone (Crozier 2001:333). The ‘negative, paternalistic bent towards parents,’ (Webster 2004:118) that these parental involvement policies can have indicates their deficit model assumptions. Arguably the response to PISA results in Ireland in 2009 provides a local example of ‘moral panic’ about falling standards.
These deficit approaches to parent education and involvement position working-class parents as ‘receivers’ of knowledge, and teachers as ‘givers’ (Beck & Murphy 1999:96), with parents who are not ‘good’ needing to be ‘brought into line’ (Crozier 2001:333). This perpetuates the ‘teacher-as-expert’ model that the parental empowerment ideal of managerial discourses is supposed to counter. Parents remain the subjects of the parental involvement initiatives (Vincent & Tomlinson 1997:366) subject, as Brien and Stelmach (2009:6) described in relation to Aboriginal parents in Canada, to ‘educator’s fixing’, and are cast ‘in the roles of clients or adjuncts to the education process’ (Miretzky 2004:833).

In managerial school climates, where the benefits of parental involvement are presented ‘as if it were a soap commercial’ (Bakker & Denessen 2007:288), the non-visibility of parents in schools is not acceptable. Much effort has been expended by schools as a result on trying to involve ‘hard-to-reach’ parents (Vincent and Tomlinson 1997:366), arguably without paying much attention to the factors or justifications that might be influencing non-involvement. The non-involvement of parents may be overstated, in that parental involvement that does not conform to policy-makers or educators expectations and requirements is often not recognised as involvement at all (Standing 1999b:71; Vandegrift & Greene 1992:57). Indeed, research into parental involvement has been criticised for being preoccupied with ‘parents who are not involved yet, or who are not involved in the right way’ (Bakker & Denesson 2007:189). As might be expected, the non-involvement of families from lower socio-economic backgrounds tends to be seen as particularly troublesome (Bakker & Denesson 2007:193; Standing 1999a, 1999b). Nakagawa (2000:459), who analysed Californian education policy, discussed how disapproval of the non-involvement of parents may be so strong as to create a sense that the children of involved parents have more of a right to education than those of non-involved parents. McNamara et al. (2000) used the military metaphor of ‘mobilising’ parents to assist in the ‘production’ of educated children, to describe the emphasis placed on parental involvement in New Labour’s educational policies in the United Kingdom.

The pressures the impropriety of non-involvement can create for parents was illustrated in an (admittedly tongue in cheek) article in The Sunday Times by Roland White (‘Gotta Dash-My Real Job is Being a School Parent’, 16/10/2011). It highlighted the potential for symbolic parental involvement to arise out of overly prescriptive managerial discourses. MacLure and Walker (2000:7) described how a parent-teacher meeting can be ‘a fertile site for the production and defence of moral identities, as “good” parents, teachers and students’. Similarly, in the context of parent-teacher meetings where parents expressed disappointment at their children’s academic progress, Baker and Keogh (1995:276) commented ‘but then, being disappointed with their children’s low marks is in itself the mark of a good parent’, which demonstrates parents positioning themselves in response to managerial constructions of the parent-teacher relationship. Parents may feel they have ‘no choice but to participate in case their choice to abstain is regarded as omission or negligence’ (Theodorou 2007:95).
Heystek (2008:479, citing Kraak & Young 2002), drew attention to the possibility of symbolic commitment of policy-makers to parental involvement, when in the context of parental governance of schools in South Africa, he noted that ‘the intent of the new legislation is not always to change the actual situation at ground level, but to indicate to supporters of the government that change is being introduced’. The stilted form of the traditional parent-teacher meeting and annual school reports may also have a symbolic intent, signalling to parents that their involvement is invited and valued, while at the same time ensuring it does not challenge the existing power structures in the school (MacGiollaPhádraig 2005:102; Walker 1998:171).

2.3.5 Concluding comments on managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations

Managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations tend to use the terminology of parent-teacher partnerships in order to maximise support for their agenda. However, it can be argued that managerial and partnership notions of parent-teacher relations are directly opposed to each other. Indeed, Wrigley (2003:99) concluded that the changes brought about by managerialism, ‘in the name of greater democracy’, have actually prevented teachers working democratically with parents and pupils. Managerial professional constructs, located within market models of schooling, assume an inherently competitive structure, between and within schools, which is not conductive to the development of partnership. Partnership requires teachers to trust parents, and vice versa, yet managerialism, through its focus on accountability, measurement and ‘fixation on standards’, exhibits an ‘erosion of trust’ in the professional judgement of teachers (Mockler 2005:741). Assumptions at the heart of managerial approaches with regard to individualism and self-interest position them in opposition to partnership as well. Parents are viewed as needing to involve themselves in school primarily to monitor and ensure adequate provision of education for their own children, and teachers need to engage with parents to protect their own reputations in market model schooling. This is very different from the mutually supportive emphasis of genuine partnerships.

Notwithstanding the apparently negative implications of managerial professionalism for parent-teacher relationships, the emphasis on parental involvement that is characteristic of managerial approaches to schooling has at least focussed attention on parent-teacher relations, which have been neglected in the past. There is now a high public consciousness of the importance of parental involvement in schools. Since parental constructions of their own role are important in dictating their actual involvement (Deslanders & Bertrand 2005:172), the idea of a ‘good parent’ being one that is involved in their child’s schooling, which is central to managerial approaches, may be a useful asset for the creation of parent-teacher partnerships in a more democratic sense. Given the contradictions between the managerial approach and that of genuine partnership, that managerial constructions will lead to democratic ones in time seems unlikely, however.
2.4 Democratic constructions of the parent-teacher relationship

2.4.1 Introductory summary of key features of democratic teacher professionalism

Discourses of democratic teacher professionalism have emerged in recent years. These discourses construct parent-teacher relationships differently from either traditional or managerial understandings, taking what is often described as a partnership approach to parental involvement in schools. Supportive relationships between the home and school are valued, and engagement with parents is regarded as being a crucial part of a professional teacher’s responsibilities. Relationships between parents and teachers are grounded in understandings of deliberative democracy and responsive accountability, requiring amenable school cultures and genuine commitment from all participants. Democratic constructions of the parent-teacher relationship lead to mutual empowerment of parents and teachers, and allow for broader understandings of ‘good’ parenting and teaching than do either traditional or managerial constructions. However, these types of relationships and involvement can be demanding of all participants, and are difficult to create.

For purposes of clarity and consistency the term ‘democratic’ professionalism is primarily used throughout this thesis. However, other terms to describe democratic teacher professionalism were found in the literature, including: ‘activist’, ‘constructive’, enacted, extended, authentic or postmodern professionalism, (inter alia Locke et al. 2005; Hargreaves 2000; Sachs 1999; Avis 2005; Ball 2003; Hoyle 1975; Hargreaves & Goodson 1996; Webb et al. 2004; Evans 2011). The following section discusses the origins, defining characteristics, and implications for parental involvement arising from democratic understandings of the parent-teacher relationship.

2.4.2 Origins and sources of democratic teacher professionalism

2.4.2.1 General description

Democratic professionalism is understood as emerging from the teaching profession itself, and is in contrast to, and in response to, managerial constructions of professionalism, which are employer dictated (Sachs 1999). Teachers are encouraged to contribute to the promotion of educational reform and societal change (Webb et al. 2004:87), which lends itself to an ‘activist’ identity, (Beane & Apple 1995:6/7, cited by Sachs 1999:6/7) involving, among other things: ensuring that people are fully informed, faith in individual and collective problem-solving capacities, concern for the welfare of others and the common good, and the promotion of democracy through the organisation of social institutions. Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:353) described this ‘activist identity’, as being ‘negotiated, collaborative, socially critical, future orientated, strategic and tactical’. Teacher autonomy rather than bureaucratic compliance is privileged, and teachers are expected to engage with active learning concepts and pupil learning, rather than taking a technicist approach to pedagogy (Webb et al. 2004:87). The social and moral responsibilities of the teaching profession are prioritised in this ‘principled professionalism’ (Goodson 2000).
Unsurprisingly, the creation of this form of teacher professionalism is challenging, which may partially explain the dominance of more easily implemented managerial approaches. As Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:353) explained; ‘Activist professionalism is not something that will come naturally. It has to be deeply reflected upon, negotiated, lived and practiced’. Despite the many problems in trying to establish ‘an activist identity’ among teachers, Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:353) were optimistic that ‘once its elements are learned and communicated it will make a significant contribution to the re-activisation of trust and all that entails’.

2.4.2.2 Emergence in conjunction with managerialism

Like managerialism, democratic constructions of teacher professionalism arose from the economic and social developments of the 1970s and 1980s, which challenged traditional notions of teacher professionalism, and led to demands for educational reform. Although managerialism was the dominant response internationally, in contexts where constructivist theories of education were prioritised over neo-liberal ideologies, such as in Finland, democratic constructions were more likely to be considered. Webb et al. (2004:101) described the resulting understanding of teacher professionalism in Finland as being:

‘predicated on teacher autonomy, a commitment to enabling pupils to become independent active learners, engagement in lifelong learning and collaboration with various educational stakeholders…….The intention is to empower teachers and enable them to influence the directions and development of educational reform’.

Admittedly even in Finland there was ‘a tension between a progressive participatory rhetoric and an incipient managerialist culture’ in relation to school monitoring (Webb et al. 2004:84), and the ‘disjuncture between policy intention and implementation’ was such that for some teachers the reforms were not perceived as being at all empowering. Nonetheless, the Finnish experience indicates that managerialism was not the only possible response to the need for educational reform, and that democratic constructions could arise from school improvement objectives as well.

Even in the many contexts in which managerial approaches to teacher professionalism have been dominant over the past three decades, the focussing of attention on issues such as teacher quality, efficiency, the purposes of education, etc., that accompanied the introduction of managerial policies, may have enhanced teacher professionalism in a democratic sense. This paradox is illustrated by Webb et al.’s (2004:102) finding that the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in the United Kingdom, although it ‘deliberately targeted pedagogy, arguably the last preserve of teacher professionalism’, did in fact lead teachers to claim increased professionalism, as they engaged in implementing it in ways that enhanced their teaching, and were suitable for their contexts, values and beliefs. It is notable Webb et al. (p101) found it necessary to dismiss the likelihood of these claims arising from ‘false consciousness’ so unlikely did it appear that managerial approaches might enhance democratic ones. Perhaps in the Irish context, the School Development Planning Initiative might be viewed, similarly,
as a development that could have been either disempowering or empowering for teachers, depending on whether managerial or democratic objectives came to the fore (Nic Craith 2003:17). Likewise, while Australian educational reforms have been identified as having managerialist assumptions, (cf. Adler 1997:303), Sachs (1997:266-268), described the moves to restructure and reform education there in the 1980s and 1990s as leading to an opportunity to reclaim ideas of teacher professionalism. According to Sachs (1997:268, citing Popekewitz 1996:30) this process ‘recast teachers as learners and researchers’. Therefore, while cynicism about democratic rhetoric contained within managerial discourse is often justified, perhaps in some cases this rhetoric does in fact have an effect on increasing democratic approaches to schools and teaching.

Notwithstanding the above points, however, democratic constructions of teacher professionalism are most usually seen as having emerged as a response to managerialism. They are understood as being in opposition to, rather than just being in contrast to, those of managerialism (cf. Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002:354). Gallagher (2014) used the analogy of disease and vaccination, when she discussed how teacher engagement with democratic discourses of professionalism may inoculate the teaching profession against the ‘germ’ (Global Education Reform Movement) of managerial approaches to teacher professionalism. Democratic collaboration is a crucial feature of democratic constructions of teacher professionalism (cf. Hargreaves 2000; Sachs 2001; Quicke 2000; Nixon, Martin, McKeown & Ranson 1997) and, hence, democratic understandings of teacher professionalism construct the parent-teacher relationship in particular ways.

2.4.2.3 Applicability to Ireland

The involvement of Irish teacher unions such as the INTO in teacher education and in policy consultation at national level suggests that teachers in Ireland envisage this type of activist professionalism for themselves. The proceedings of the INTO’s 2014 Consultative Conference demonstrated that the fostering of democratic approaches to teacher professionalism is a serious concern of the teaching body at the present time in Ireland. A democratic rhetoric can be identified in many Department of Education policies relating to school improvement, self-evaluation and whole-school planning (cf. Looking at our school 2003, Developing a School Plan 1999). The holistic and constructivist approaches to education that underpin the 1999 Revised Primary Curriculum also suggest agreement with the principles of democratic teacher professionalism. As noted in Section 2.3, however, the increasing strength of managerial approaches in Irish educational policy-making poses a significant challenge to the emergence of more democratic versions of professionalism.

2.4.2.4 Relevance of democratic teacher professionalism to parental involvement

Sachs (1999:1) argued that ‘collaborative, co-operative action between teachers and other educational stakeholders’ is crucial to democratic professionalism. She (p2) described reciprocity between teachers and stakeholders whereby ‘both groups come to understand the nature and limitations of each other’s work and perspectives’. In citing Preston (1996:192) Sachs made a direct
connection between democratic professionalism and parental involvement; ‘democratic professionalism does not seek to mystify professional work, or to unreasonably restrict access to that work; it facilitates the participation in decision-making by students, parents and others...’ Locke et al. (2005:560), drawing on Sachs’ notion of the activist professional, highlighted the emphasis this places on ‘trust-building collaborative practices across sectional interests’, as did Bousted and Johnson (2005:19). The concern for the quality of human relationships found in communal discourses was also emphasised by Bauch & Goldring (2000:6, citing Bryk, Lee & Smith 1990). Parent-teacher relations are constructed very differently by discourses of democratic professionalism than they are by traditional or managerial discourses; therefore, it is necessary to examine these constructions when considering parental involvement and parent-teacher relations in schools.

2.4.3 Defining characteristics of democratic parent-teacher relations

The defining characteristics of democratic approaches to parent-teacher relations include: a holistic understanding of school improvement, a partnership approach to parental involvement, responsibilities to parents forming part of a teacher’s core role, the use of deliberative democracy, accountability in a responsive sense, genuine commitment from all participants, supportive school cultures and the recognition of the importance of interpersonal relationships. These characteristics are discussed below.

2.4.3.1 Holistic approach to school improvement

Although ‘school effectiveness’ tends to be presented in managerial discourses as a factual and quantifiable concept, Ranson et al. (2005:360) drew attention to the various ways it can be conceptualised, by comparing the ‘radically different’ understandings of school achievement in England, Scotland and Wales. Distinguishing the term ‘School Improvement’ (broad purposes of education, holistic, constructivist) from ‘School Effectiveness’ (narrow, attainment focused, accountable, measurable) is useful when examining how democratic discourses of teacher professionalism affect school achievement (cf. Wrigley 2003; Glover & Coleman 2005). Unfortunately, however, these terms are not used consistently in the literature; indeed, some researchers apply them in reverse (cf. Harris & Goodall 2008:278). Nevertheless, following Wrigley’s classification, democratic constructions of teacher professionalism and parent-teacher partnership are most usually associated with school improvement rather than effectiveness.

School improvement approaches imagine the school context in terms of ‘causal nets in which multiple factors have reciprocal impact’ (Büeler 1998:674, cited by Wrigley 2003:93), so avoiding the linear, ordered idea of managerial approaches. Its holistic focus is less likely to lead to situations where ‘the testable basics’ ‘push out’ other aspects of the curriculum (Wrigley 2003:95). Wrigley (2003:106) emphasised the need for democratic constructions of curricula to recognise the importance of ‘democratic living and political empowerment’. Similarly, Bauch (2001:207) indicated the
curricular questions that arise if schools are ‘about cultivating the intellectual and moral autonomy of individuals’. Unlike the ‘tough’ language of school effectiveness then, democratic constructions of teacher professionalism are concerned with ‘the soft horticultural language of growth, nurturing and blossoming’ (MacBeath 2012:49), although this is not to suggest that their interest in school improvement is any less thorough than that of other constructions. Indeed, this ‘new direction for improvement’, described by Wrigley (2003:110) as ‘future orientated and truly transformational’ is likely to be more demanding and onerous than the narrow, defined objectives of school effectiveness.

2.4.3.2 Partnership with parents

Parental involvement is one of the factors that has ‘reciprocal impact’ on school improvement. Hence, parent-teacher partnerships, where the holistic benefits of parental involvement for all participants are recognised, are characteristic of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations. Partnership is, however, a concept requiring careful definition, as Section 2.3 demonstrated.

Partnership and the challenges inherent in trying to establish it between parents and teachers are discussed below.

Most of the definitions of parent-teacher partnership found in the literature involve aspirations such as ‘a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate’ (Pugh & De’Ath 1989, cited by MacGiollaPhádraig 2005:95), ‘complementary expertise, mutual respect, a willingness to learn from each other’ (Armstrong 1995:18), ‘reciprocity, democratic process and variety of opportunities’ (Davies 2000:42), and ‘a readiness to come together with a sense of equality and a clarity of role, as well as mutual support’ (Cullingford & Morrison 1999:254). Some parent-teacher partnerships are envisaged in mainly educational terms (Epstein 1995). However, MacGiollaPhádraig (2005), and Fine (1993, cited by Stellmach 2005:183), among others, noted the importance of parental influence and active involvement in decision-making, if the relationship is to be accurately described as partnership. Giles’s (2006:679) differentiation between the leadership of and the management of parental involvement can usefully be applied when defining partnership, as in partnership it is leadership rather than management that is to the fore. Although some definitions of partnership require equality between parents and teachers, this is disputed by others (cf. Sykes 2001:274); with Todd and Higgins (1998:228) arguing that ‘joint endeavour’ is more important, as equality is an impossible concept to achieve. Far from being a straightforward concept, partnership as an approach to parent-teacher relations is ‘highly ideological and politically weighted’ (McNamara et al. 2000:484).

The mutuality of partnership implies a less school-centric view of parental involvement, than do traditional or managerial constructions. Epstein’s model of overlapping spheres of influence and responsibility between the home and the school is useful when considering partnerships (inter alia Epstein 1995), as is Ranson’s (2012:29) discussion of co-constructed ‘webs of significance that mediate home and school’. It is likely that many traditional forms of parent-teacher interaction, such as the ‘ritual’ nature of the formal, annual parent-teacher meeting, or the ‘professional judgement’ of
the school report, require major changes if they are to reflect this understanding of partnership (MacGiollaPhádraig 2005:98-101). Davies’ (2000:44) exhortation ‘understand that partnership is a two-way street’, may, therefore, highlight one of its most important defining characteristics. The reciprocal stance of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations differentiates them from the school-centric perspectives of both traditional and managerial understandings.

Unfortunately, the above definitions of parent-teacher partnership are not widely understood; ‘Schools sincerely believe that they work in a partnership with parents, but some hold the oddest notions of partnership’ (Wilkins 2003:6). That the terminology of partnership has been hijacked by managerialism, (cf. Connell 2009:220) greatly adds to the complexity of explaining democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. The subjective nature of what partnership might be (Bojuwoye 2009:463) also complicates the definition debate. Bauch (2001:205) noted that it is, consequently, a term that needs to be used ‘advisedly’, and recommended viewing partnerships ‘from a more ethical stance’. Indeed, the term partnership has been described as a ‘fallen word’ and qualifications such as ‘authentic partnership’ (Hartas 2008:142, citing Wolfendale 1985, Anderson 1998,) ‘real partnership’ or ‘Joint Acting’ (Ravn 1989, 1997, cited by Ravn 1998:377) have been used in the literature to try ‘rescue’ it (McNamara et al. 2000:481). Since there is a tendency for Irish educational policies to refer to parent-teacher partnership without providing further explanation, it would appear that the implications and assumptions of parent-teacher partnership have not been adequately interrogated in Irish education.

Arguably too the over-use of the term ‘partnership’ in the literature and in public discourse internationally has damaged its usefulness for explaining democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. According to Hodge and Runswick-Cole (2008:638) partnership between teachers and parents has become a ‘modern day mantra...the unquestionable ideal’ in the United Kingdom. Much of the literature presents an ‘idealised, unproblematic view’ (Brook & Hancock 2000:260), suggesting that when barriers to partnership between parents and teachers are overcome, then partnership will provide a solution to most school problems. It is notable that parent-teacher partnership continues to be presented as ‘a panacea’ (Bakker & Denessen 2007:188) in spite of the wariness about parental involvement evident in or arising from traditional and managerial constructs of parent-teacher relations. The terminology of partnership itself may be effective in neutralising negative connotations, with Kristoffersson (2009:37) describing it as ‘the new prestige word’, although Vincent and Tomlinson (1997:366) commented on the ‘fragility and shallowness of the partnership rhetoric’. Dom and Verhoeven (2006:569) also noted the ‘superficiality’ of language that is characteristic of the partnership debate.

Despite the frequency with which partnership terminology is used when parent-teacher relations are discussed, Davies (2000:41, in Massachusetts) was among those who remarked on how ‘reality has lagged far behind rhetoric when it comes to forging effective partnerships’. McNamara et al. (2000:10) suggested that the simplistic rhetoric of partnership results in feelings of frustration,
inadequacy and blame among parents and teachers who do not achieve working partnerships, if they have been lead to believe that it is an uncomplicated process. Similarly, Hobbins McGrath (2007:1416, in the US) found that ‘the paradigm of partnership between parents and teachers generated expectations that rarely were met’. Lareau and Shumar (1996:34) emphasised the need to facilitate meaningful parental involvement, rather than being content with any parental involvement in schools. Arguably little attention is paid to differentiating between meaningful or other parental involvement in Irish schools at the present time (cf. Bleach 2010:268).

Notwithstanding the above description of undue optimism regarding parental involvement, some commentators did acknowledge the ‘unpredictable and possibly unwelcome results’ of parental involvement and partnership (Morgan & Fraser 1993:45), or what Lareau (1989/2000) called the ‘dark side of parental involvement’. A lack of balance was identified by Sykes (2001:274) who noted how (in the context of home-school agreements in the United Kingdom) the debate about parental involvement tends to characterise parents in a way ‘that swings between idealistic vision and critical apprehension’. A debate that does not adequately reflect realities and concerns at school level is unlikely to reassure teachers that investment in parent-teacher partnership will bring other than extra complexities for them. The recognition of these challenges should not be used as an excuse to avoid parental involvement, according to Hargreaves (2000:174) who, while acknowledging that parents can be ‘a pain’, was adamant that it was ‘especially when parents are critical, suspicious and difficult that partnerships are essential’. For Mockler (2005:742) openness to risk taking and innovation was a crucial part of transformative teacher professionalism. This understanding has implications for the way teachers approach their interactions with parents, as is discussed later in this chapter.

2.4.3.3 Parental involvement is crucial part of democratic teacher professionalism

Collaboration with parents is seen as part of a teacher’s core function in democratic constructions of the parent-teacher relationship, with implications both for teacher professionalisation, and teacher professionalism. The centrality of collaboration and partnership poses challenges for traditional notions of what it is to be a professional teacher, particularly regarding teacher professional knowledge. While parental involvement in this sense can be supportive of teacher morale, care also needs to be taken that teacher self-efficacy is encouraged, given its importance for the development of parent-teacher relations.

Such is the emphasis placed on collaborative relationships with others in democratic teacher professionalism that engaging in partnerships with parents is regarded as central to the duties of a professional teacher. Indeed, Hargreaves (2000:175/6) presented a greater willingness to invest in parent-teacher relationships as a possible way to maintain and rejuvenate teacher professionalism: ‘If teachers want to become professionally stronger, they must open themselves up to and become more publicly vulnerable and accessible. That is the paradoxical challenge in the post-modern world.’ This is necessary, he suggested, because technological advances are changing the ways in which schools
and teachers are perceived, and because societal changes are affecting the status of teaching. Hence, according to Hargreaves, an openness to parents is what teacher professionalism will depend on in the future, and on which trust, commitment and support for teachers will be based. In such a construction of teacher professionalism, being ‘professional’ and being ‘approachable’ are no longer regarded as incompatible (Miretzky 2004:839), and by relating well with parents, teachers can enhance the esteem in which they are held (Lazar & Slostad 1999:209). Bottery (1996:194), discussing professions more generally, came to a similar conclusion, calling for the end of a professionalism characterised by ‘infallibility and unchallengeability’, to one ‘of an expert much more prepared to communicate, educate and to learn from the client’, in order to ‘secure a firmer foundation for their practice and for the trust of the public’.

Good parent-teacher relations are likely to contribute positively to teachers’ self-efficacy, thereby supporting the development of effective school cultures (cf. inter alia Jowett et al. 1991:3; Koutroba et al. 2009:312; Glover & Coleman 2005:253). These cultures allow for the development of parent-teacher partnership. In her discussion of enabling professionalism, Tschannen-Moran (2009:231) identified trust within the school, and between the school and its external community as a feature of a ‘professional orientation in schools’. Hobbins McGrath (2007:1420) suggested that committed partnerships between parents and teachers result in ‘support and respect for all teachers’, while Standing (1999b:72) regarded good parent-teacher relations as likely to prevent ‘the discourse of teacher blaming’ which is so damaging to perceptions of teacher professionalism. Wilkins (2003:6) described parent-teacher partnership, therefore, as a ‘win-win relationship’. Despite the generally positive and affirming descriptions of partnership, however, it is notable that Cullingford and Morrison (1999:254) commented on how easy it is for such relationships to become ones of ‘mutual mistrust and recrimination’. Also, Miretzky (2004:829) found that ‘it was difficult for both parents and teachers to identify benefits for themselves through improved adult relationships’, which somewhat reduces the likelihood of positive effects on professional or parental identities. In the Irish context, since teaching generally enjoys a high status the possible effects of parental involvement on teachers’ self-efficacy may not be as important as it is in other contexts.

Engaging with parents is of itself a professional task in the democratic sense, as teachers, by engaging in the complex and challenging activities of responsive accountability, that require higher order thinking skills, collaboration and co-ordination, enhance their professionalism (cf. Hancock 1998:410; Tschannen-Moran 2009:225). This also allows parents access to the complexity, busyness and multi-faceted nature of teachers’ everyday work (Macmillan 1998:13). The ability and confidence of teachers to discuss teaching and learning with parents, may, according to Hargreaves (2000:173), be dependent on the consistency of their professional understanding and, hence, demonstrate their professionalism. Teacher professionalism, as well as professional status, can, therefore, be supported by parental involvement in schools. A teacher’s professional responsibility in democratic constructions goes ‘beyond the classroom’ (Tichenor & Tichenor 2005:93). The extent to which an Irish primary
teacher’s duty is widely seen as going beyond the classroom is debatable, although an awareness among teachers of the importance of parental involvement has been commented upon in the literature (MacGiollaPhádraig 2003a:42).

However, the above scenario, where teacher professionalism is enhanced through teacher engagement with parents, is unlikely to occur in the absence of support for teachers to extend their professional knowledge to incorporate the skills necessary for collaboration with parents. Working with parents can be very different from working with children (Pang & Watkins 2000:146), and there is much reference in the literature to teachers lacking the necessary skills at the present time (inter alia Lazar & Slostad 1999:207; Miretzky 2004:844; Powell 1991:316; Ratcliff & Hunt 2009). Facilitating the involvement of parents in meaningful ways, as well as attending to all other teaching and childcare tasks is undoubtedly challenging, and teachers are likely to require training and support if they are to be successful (Bridgemohan et al. 2005:73; Borg & Mayo 2001:260). It would appear that many parental involvement initiatives in the past have failed to address the issue of teacher capacity and confidence adequately. Given the importance of teacher self-efficacy for successful partnerships (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie 1987:429; Pang & Watkins 2000:147), this is a major omission. The increased emphasis now being placed on parent-teacher interactions in initial teacher education programmes in Ireland suggests that this gap is now at least acknowledged in the Irish context (Teaching Council 2011).

The issue of teacher self-efficacy arises also when considering that democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations pose a substantial challenge to traditional notions of the teacher-as-expert. This is significant given that even in the teacher-as-expert model professional insecurity hindered the development of parental involvement. Issues of insecurity are likely to be all the more relevant when the educational role of the home and the school are recognised, teacher and parent knowledge is seen as complementary, and the possibility that teachers might be able to learn from parents is raised. However, democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations do not deny the importance of professional knowledge in the context of the school, as that would be an extreme and adverse reaction to the historical prioritising of professional over parental knowledge (cf. Hartas 2008:148; Lightfoot 1981:101; Ranson 2012:39). The importance of professional pedagogical knowledge was noted by Edwards and Warin (1999:336), who found that teachers sometimes gave complex pedagogical tasks to parents without realising how difficult they might be for the parents to complete. An appreciation of the knowledge of the parent in democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations does not, indeed cannot, challenge the expert knowledge of the teacher, therefore. In light of Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Brissie’s (1992:293) comment that ‘high-efficacy teachers may hear legitimate questions in a parent comment, whereas low-efficacy teachers hear criticism and threat’, it is crucial to ensure teachers’ identities as professional educators are adequately supported if parent-teacher partnerships are to develop.
Along with the challenge posed to the ‘teacher-as-expert’ model of teacher professionalism, traditional ideas of teacher professionalism more generally are likely to need ‘redefinition and reconceptualisation’ before collaboration with parents or other teachers is to be successful (Goode 1987:123; Johnston & Hedemann 1994:304). Bottery (1996:194) summarised this nicely when he referred to teachers having ‘to change their spots’ in order to achieve a healthier and more productive professional existence. Bauch and Goldring (1998:1) suggested that a new approach to parents would require a ‘lessening of teacher autonomy in favour of collaborative decision-making’, which may lead to what Cochran and Dean (1991:208) described as ‘uncomfortable moments’ when those accustomed to being in charge start to share decision-making power. Given the defensiveness which surrounds teacher professionalism generally, it is apt to be difficult for teachers to ‘move towards the danger here, rather than closet themselves away’ (Hargreaves 2000:175). Familiarity with managerial notions of ‘partnership’ and ‘democratic participation’ is likely to make teachers wary of similar sounding concepts. Furthermore, the emotive nature of professionalism (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:572) and the difficulties of debating it in a detached manner are likely to reduce the effectiveness of the argument that parent-teacher partnership is supportive of democratic teacher professionalism. It is notable that while Bauch and Goldring (1998:20) acknowledged the possibilities of teacher professionalism being developed into partnership with parents, they advised (citing Ayers 1992) that ‘there is no model of a professionalism of this type’, and some researchers remain hesitant about the feasibility of partnerships at all, as Cankar et al. (2009:15) acknowledged. The undoubted challenges have not prevented the emergence and retention of partnership aspirations, however.

2.4.3.4 Genuine commitment required

Unlike managerial understandings of parent-teacher relationships, democratic constructions place little emphasis on legislation or bureaucratic procedures. Rather a genuine commitment to partnership is required of all participants.

A dedication to parental involvement for its own sake is assumed (Bauch & Goldring 2000; Beck & Murphy 1999:93; Epstein 1995:712) in democratic constructions of the parent-teacher relationship. Pang and Watkins (2000:159, in Hong Kong) found that teacher commitment was the best predictor of a teacher’s effort in communicating with parents, and this rather unsurprising finding seems widely applicable. This understanding of parent-teacher relations fits with the ‘bottom-up’ approach that is characteristic of democratic professionalism, rather than the ‘top-down’ approach of managerialism (Sachs 1999). Sergiovanni’s (1998:44) description of ‘social covenants’ that are maintained by ‘loyalty, fidelity, kinships, sense of identity, obligation, duty, responsibility and reciprocity’, may be useful in describing the form this genuine commitment needs to take. The resulting relationships are quite different from those arising from the more rules driven ‘social contracts’, also described by Sergiovanni.
Given this need for genuine commitment, instrumental or legally mandated motivations are unlikely to be adequate for the creation of parent-teacher partnership in the democratic professional sense. Since ‘true collaborative relationships are spontaneous, voluntary, development orientated, unpredictable and pervasive across time and space’, (Johnston & Hedeman 1994: 404, citing Hargreaves 1991:53/54), restrictive legislation is likely to be counter-productive, as according to Todd and Higgins (1998:235) ‘partnership without flexibility will simply reflect the hierarchical power structures that currently exists’. The product emphasis of legislative approaches contradicts the process approach needed to develop partnerships (Epstein 1995:711). Indeed, Brien and Stelmach (2009:6) contended that so great is the ‘philosophical and ideological’ shift that has to take place if the relationship between parents and teachers is to be reconceptualised, that legislation is almost irrelevant; it will have to happen ‘outside of – or perhaps in spite of – legal structures’. This point is supported by the finding that parental involvement initiatives that are inspired from the school or parent body itself tend to be more successful than those imposed from outside the school (Hornby & Witte 2010:61) Accordingly, partnership programmes cannot be thought of as ‘how-to-do’ manuals, ‘blue-prints’ or ‘recipes’ (Webster 2004:123; Stelmach 2005:182; Georgiou 1998:366). Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that parent-teacher relationships, no matter how ‘caring’ their inspiration, need to be supported by a ‘clear shared educational vision’ (Din 2000:5) if they are to be protected from being abandoned once the initial enthusiasm wears off or when other more urgent pressures arise in the school (Brook & Hancock 2000:262). Sanders (2012:866) discussed the need for parent involvement programmes to ‘dwell between’ the two extremes of ‘rigidity’ and ‘flexibility’. Accordingly, how to foster and protect genuine commitment to partnership in the absence of effective legislation or other incentives is one of the major challenges of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations.

In keeping with the need for a genuine, bottom-up commitment on the part of parents and teachers towards relationships of partnership, is the notion that genuine partnership needs to be ‘embedded within the overall philosophy of a school’ (Christenson & Hurley 1997:118). While democratic constructions of the parent-teacher relationship do not deny the importance of good parent-teacher relationships at an individual level, given the nature of teaching it can be easy for good practices between parents and teachers to ‘remain isolated within a single classroom’ (Hancock 1998:408). Accordingly Bauch and Goldring (1998:29) described how teaching has to move away from the individualism that was ‘the backbone of the old professionalism’ to ‘a teacher culture of collaboration’ with teachers and parents having the ability ‘to create what they jointly see as a collaborative learning community’ (p24). This recognises that parental involvement is likely to be influenced by ‘the daily interactions and relations inside the school’ (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:589), as well as by interactions specifically between parents and teachers. As Riley and Stoll (2004:40) explained, ‘it is hard to expect teachers to develop that mutuality and trust with the external community, if they don’t have it within their school community’. This points to the importance of
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school culture for the development of genuine parent-teacher partnerships. It also indicates the complexity inherent in establishing partnerships in schools.

2.4.3.5 Democracy

Democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations are, as the terminology suggests, grounded in the understanding that democratic processes, even if sometimes flawed, are the best method of making decisions that affect the well-being of people. The concept of democracy is understood differently in democratic constructions than it is in managerial ones, however, being of a deliberative rather than adversarial type.

According to Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:352) ‘deliberative democracy is a foundation upon which an activist identity is located’. Feuerstein’s (2002:26-31; also Tveit 2009:296, citing Habermas 1996) definition of deliberative approaches to democracy revolves around the need for continual discussion to cope with inevitable disagreements between people, with the intention being to provide mutually acceptable justifications for the opinions and positions of each person. It also requires decision makers to consider the views of their ‘moral constituents’ as well as those registered to vote, acknowledging the tendency for certain sections of the population to be excluded from influence. It is, therefore, based more on a ‘public conversation’ than on a ‘collective of individual choices’ (Covaleskie 2007:32), where ‘the goal of this process is to reach consensus in a communicative action where no one single voice is privileged’ (Tveit 2007:200, referring to Habermas 1984/1987). Apple (2014: xix) described this as ‘thick’ rather than ‘thin’ democracy. In many ways the definitions of deliberative democracy and partnership approaches coincide. Reciprocity, the provision of mutually acceptable reasons for each other’s position rather than just trying to sway the other person to their point of view, and continual processes, are common to both.

Deliberative democracy is not an unproblematic concept, however. Issues of representativeness and public interest are likely to be as relevant as for other forms of democracy. Clarke (2012:306,307) referred to the dangers of ‘consensual discourse’ where any dissent is ‘rendered unreadable and unthinkable’ and noted how ‘consensus’ has supported the emergence of instrumental educational reform in Australia. Furthermore, aside from the particular time and emotional challenges presented by ‘public conversation’, is the often ignored fact that sometimes people, whether because of their temperament, experiences, or confidence, find engaging with democratic structures very difficult (cf. Heystek 2006; Pena 1998; Van Wyk 2007). Similarly, Dewey (1916, cited by Schultz 2001:281) argued: ‘democratic action was only possible where individuals had the minimum resources that would enable them to engage in it’. If this is true for adversarial democracy, it is likely to be all the more relevant for deliberative constructions. Furthermore, it would be naïve to ignore the limitations of deliberative democracy, in certain situations and for certain decisions, as even Mansbridge, (1980, cited by Feuerstein 2002:26) who advocated deliberative processes, conceded that
in circumstances where ‘individual interests significantly diverge’, it may be necessary to adopt adversarial practices.

2.4.3.6 Responsive accountability

Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:346) were clear that activist professionalism does not deny the need for teacher accountability. However, teacher accountability is understood very differently in the context of deliberative democratic constructions of the parent-teacher relationship than it is in traditional or managerial constructs of professionalism. Indeed, Thomson, Lingard and Wrigley (2012:3) argued that accountability has to be ‘reclaimed’ for progressive, educational and democratic purposes.

Forster (1999; also Codd 2005:203) provided a description of ‘process’ or ‘responsive’ accountability, which differs greatly from narrow legalistic definitions of accountability that are concerned with extrinsic monitoring, assessment and control. For Forster, this responsive accountability requires teachers to self-evaluate and reflect on their work, a process that is likely to enhance their teaching. It needs parents to be able to question the teacher on the validity or appropriateness of their teaching, and for the teachers to respond in a way that is neither ‘dismissive’ nor ‘deferential’, but rather is mutually empowering. The accountability is based on rich accounts that do not apportion blame or praise, and involve both teacher and parent participation. Forster’s descriptions of this type of ‘responsive accountability’ are close to definitions of parent-teacher partnership as both parents and teachers are involved in ‘information sharing, reflection, discussion and planning in the common pursuit of the best learning opportunities of the child’ and, indeed, she used the expression ‘treating the parent as a partner’ in her description of it. Furthermore, she suggested that while self-evaluation may be occurring as good practice in schools anyway, the process is enhanced by including a parental element to it; creating ‘an outward looking project that acknowledges schooling to be a shared endeavour built upon a partnership between the school and its community’. A similar notion of accountability was proposed by Thomson, Lingard and Wrigley (2012:3); one that is ‘profession-controlled, community-engaged, richer, more intelligent…’ This perspective involves basing the accountability on the broad sense of a teacher’s moral responsibility to those who are affected by their work, rather than on an externally imposed standards agenda.

The dominance of managerial constructs of accountability in many contexts results in ‘narrowed conceptions of accountability’ (DiMartino & Scott 2013:309) being taken for granted. Therefore, care needs to be taken to ensure that the difference between managerial and responsive accountability is clear in the minds of all partners. Confusion of the two forms is likely to hinder responsive accountability. Furthermore, responsive accountability makes far greater demands of parents than the accountability of the performativity agenda, and is demanding of teachers as well. In light of the strength of traditional models of teacher-as-expert, it is likely that it would be difficult to
convince teachers to engage with such forms of responsive accountability. Hence, its characterisation as an ‘elusive goal’ (DiMartino & Scott 2013:310).

2.4.3.7 Interpersonal relations, emotional dimension

Positive, trusting and reciprocal interpersonal relations, both at individual and collective levels, are prioritised in democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. While this contrasts with the defensiveness of traditional constructions and the measurability and accountability agenda of managerialism, the focus on the interpersonal dimension is a particular source of complexity for democratic constructions of parental involvement. It means they can be very demanding of participants.

Trust between parents and teachers is central to the achievement of the good interpersonal relationships that are a precondition for partnership (inter alia Deslandes & Bertrand 2005:173; Comer 2005:38; Epstein 1995:705; Codd 2005:204). It is ‘active trust’ that is assumed in democratic constructions (Vincent 2001:350-352). Active trust can act as ‘superglue’ to bind communities, such as those of parents and schools, together (Riley & Stoll 2004:38). Sui Chu (2007:9) discussed trust in the context of trusting practices, cultures, attitudes and behaviour, rather than as a core personality trait of individuals. According to Vincent & Martin (2002:115), ‘trust between individuals and institutions has to be won by the latter and actively sustained’, which has implications for the responsibilities of teachers in developing trusting relationships with parents, albeit that trust cannot be one-sided. Since truly trusting relationships are grounded in the assumption that ‘relationships will be dependable and that neither sanctions nor rewards are necessary for it to be exercised’ (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002:343), they construct parent-teacher relationships very differently from managerial understandings of policing and accountability. However, the dilemma of how to promote trusting relationships in the absence of rewards or sanctions being useful remains pertinent, as does the likelihood that it is difficult, if not impossible, for those outside of the particular interaction to encourage trust within it. It also requires a ‘long overdue shift in the culture of blame’ (Todd & Higgins 1998:235) that has traditionally characterised parent-teacher relations. Regardless of how intractable the problem of trust fostering might appear, however, in light of the centrality of trust to democratic constructions of parent-teacher relationships, it is a problem that has to be addressed in schools if meaningful partnerships are ever to be created. Indeed, it is possible to argue that a trustful relationship, more than all the other features discussed above, is the defining characteristic of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations, and one that distinguishes them from traditional or managerial understandings.

Some commentators (cf. Keyes 2002:179) have described good trusting relationships in terms of relationships that have no conflict. However, this may not necessarily be the case, as correctly managed conflict can in fact be evidence of healthy relationships. Indeed, Keyes herself noted that an absence of conflict in a relationship can indicate an absence of caring. Moreover, if conflict avoidance
becomes a major priority, this is likely to stymie meaningful interaction, as Donnelly (1999:229) noted when she referred to the ‘deceptive calm’ that can arise from being ‘acutely aware of the need to preserve harmonious relationships’. A somewhat similar point was made by Lea, Thompson, McRae-Williams and Wegner (2011:333) in relation to Indigenous parents in Australia’s Northern Territory, who had been ‘befriended’ by schools and, therefore, had high trust in them, but this prevented parental engagement of the ‘suspicious, expectant kind’ that the authors felt might facilitate the children’s academic progress. Also the schools’ efforts to build up trusting relationships with parents resulted in ‘well-meaning pastoral programmes and extension services’ that did not necessarily advance the academic goals of the school (p334). Since it is only in truly open and democratic forums that people feel comfortable in expressing opposing viewpoints and opinions (Gay & Place 1988:4, citing Hersey & Blanchard 1988:355; Donnelly 1999:231, citing Esp & Saran 1995), the facility to handle conflict beneficially is likely to be more typical of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relationships than of other constructions. Krüger and Michalek (2011:8), for instance, noted that ‘conflictual relationships’ and the ‘possibility of failing’ can be a ‘naturally given consequence of a teacher’s professional activities’ with regard to parents. Epstein (1995:705) suggested that successful partnerships may be strengthened through having to resolve problems together. Therefore, dissent is not necessarily the opposite of partnership, as Hartas (2008:148) summarised: ‘partnerships do not operate within absolute notions of agreement and disagreement but in the spaces between’. Conflict may in fact be ‘creative’ (Lightfoot 1981:102) although of course not if it results in damage to the interpersonal relations on which partnerships must be based.

The interpersonal dimension of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations are very demanding of participants, emotionally and psychologically (Hobbins McGrath 2007), as well as in terms of time and resources (Jowett et al. 1991:52), albeit the ‘emotional labour’ involved can also be rewarding for participants (Cullen, Cullen & Lindsay 2013). Parent-teacher partnership requires an ongoing commitment by teachers, to a continual process (Epstein 1995:4) that cannot ever be fully realised. Since the cohort of parents changes frequently (Bauch 2001:217) teachers often have to start over in their relationships with parents, relationships that are likely to be far easier to damage than to nurture (Adams & Christenson 1999:481). The emotional costs of partnership also apply to parents, possibly to a more intense degree, given the emotional attachment parents have to their children and their children’s education (cf. O’Brien 2005). Since ‘both parties to the relationship are buffeted by the strains and tensions in their worlds’ (Keyes 2002:181), issues which bear little relevance to the school can damage parent-teacher relations. Miretzky (2004:845) alluded to the vulnerability of parent-teacher relationships to outside stressors when she commented, ‘these connections are valued – but when push comes to shove, parent-teacher relationships frequently go to the back of the line’ (also Adams & Christenson 1999:492). For teachers with large classes (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:593), working in difficult circumstances, or with challenges in their personal lives, the extra emotional effort required for parent-teacher partnerships may be too much. Indeed, in some situations, teaching itself
may be so demanding as to make the additional effort required to involve parents daunting (Hancock 1998:405). The difficulties of creating partnerships, and people’s desire for peace and quiet can lead to what Dusi (2012:15) described as a ‘pact of non-interference’ between parents and teachers, that has to be overcome if genuine partnerships are to be achieved.

While the time demands of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relationships take a different form to the time constraints imposed by bureaucratic managerialism, this does not mean they are less onerous. The ongoing and undefined demands of creating good relationships may actually make time issues all the more challenging. Partnership by its nature is inherently time-consuming, particularly when consensus approaches to decision-making are used (Donnelly 1999:232). Given the busy context of schools this is challenging and, indeed, it was noted that schools are rarely able to devote ‘prime time’ to parental involvement, it often being ‘confined to bits and pieces of time rather than embedded in the life of the school’ (Hancock 1998:405; Miretzky 2004:840). Time constraints may be of particular concern to teachers, pressured as they are to fit many tasks into the working day, but for parents too the time demands of involvement in schools can lead to ‘overload’, and this is especially relevant given that those parents most involved in schools are those likely to be involved in other community organisations as well (cf. Gardin & Apple 2002:37). This is a difficult problem to solve, as Miretzky (2004:842) described time as the ‘critical ingredient’ for the development of meaningful parental involvement and emphasised (p818) that those involved in decision-making ‘must have talked enough to share a common understanding of the framework in which a decision has been made’. She (p826) elaborated this point when she noted that, in the context of her own research, ‘even if no great revelations resulted, the opportunity to talk together in and of itself, was beneficial’.

However, it may be very difficult for parents and teachers to accept that time investments are essential, rather than viewing ‘talk time’ as non-productive, and of course care does need to be taken that time is not wasted and that procrastination is avoided. As with other aspects of interpersonal relations, it is difficult for those outside the interaction context to ensure that best use is made of the time available.

If both parents and teachers are genuinely committed to partnership, have trusting relationships where conflict is handled appropriately, and are supported emotionally and practically in engaging with each other, it might be assumed that the good communication needed for genuine partnership is then a foregone conclusion. However, good communication is a more complicated concept than is often assumed. For instance, Bridgemahon et al. (2005:60) noted the difficulties involved in assessing communication, while Hallgarten (2000:34) commented on the tendency to confuse information transmission for active communication. The importance of routine daily exchanges and frequent communication between parents and teachers for building relationships was noted in the literature (inter alia Hobbins McGrath 2007:1404; MacGiollaPhádraig 2005:100). Jowett et al. (1991:115) referred for the same reason to the need for consistency and continuity in the school personnel that parents interact with. The emphasis on communication and conversation between
parents and teachers, and the importance of a ‘personal touch’ to parents (Lindle 1989:13) adds to the emotionally demanding nature of partnerships for both parents and teachers.

2.4.4 Implications of democratic teacher professionalism for parent-teacher relations

Democratic understandings of school improvement, partnership approaches, teacher responsibility towards parents, the limitations of legislative approaches, collective commitment, deliberative democracy, responsive accountability and the importance of interpersonal relationships have a variety of implications for parent-teacher relations in schools, as discussed above. An understanding of power that positions either parents or teachers as powerless in the relationship is not conductive to democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations, nor are deficit approaches to parents compatible, as discussed below.

2.4.4.1 Power relations in democratic constructions of the parent-teacher relationship

A more complex concept of power than that relevant to traditional or managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations is required when democratic constructions are being considered. Such a concept is discussed below.

The simplistic, quantifiable concepts of power that are often assumed in traditional or managerial contexts are not adequate when considering partnerships, as empowerment for all participants is a pre-condition for authentic partnership (Stelmach 2005:180; Vincent 1996b). Drawing on the Foucauldian understanding of power as something that is exercised by individuals rather than held as a quantifiable commodity (Foucault 1980) is likely to provide a more useful conception of power in partnerships. ‘Exercising’ offers a more flexible understanding of power than ‘possession’, and accounts for personal choice and consent both in exercising power and in allowing others to exercise power. This may explain the very different ways the parent-teacher relationship can be negotiated in different schools. It suggests that genuine partnerships in school decision-making are possible, as power cannot be ‘owned’ by a select few, albeit that in many schools only a limited number of people actually exercise power. The contention that power operates in a net-like structure can be applied to relationships between parents and teachers, where the participants ‘are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power’ (Foucault 1980:98). Viewing power in the context of a net is promising for the potential development of genuine parent-teacher partnerships, as it is difficult to envisage partnership if power is understood only as flowing in a linear or hierarchical structure, given that partnership assumes that there can be ‘greater power and influence for both sides and the education system as a whole when power is exercised collaboratively’ (Bauch & Goldring 1998:26, citing Golby 1993, Liebermann 1988). This ‘dual empowerment’ approach is likely to be crucial to gaining teacher support for greater parental involvement, as it challenges traditional and managerial perspectives that see teacher disempowerment as a consequence of parental involvement.
Empowerment in partnerships remains a complex concept, however, particularly when Bauch and Goldring’s (1998:24; also Todd & Higgins 1998) point that dual empowerment does ‘not always preclude the presence of a dominant partner’ is considered. While this acknowledges the central position of teachers in encouraging parent-teacher partnerships to develop, it does raise the possibility of a return to traditional forms of power relationship, where teachers remain in control. Additionally, all parent-teacher interactions are affected by their ‘historical, geographical, class and gender contexts’ (Birenbaum-Carmeli 1999:63) and mediated by ‘third party systems, structures and agents’ (Vincent 1996a:467). This complexity is compounded by the understanding that power in relationships is rarely static or unchanging (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:570). Power may be exercised in different ways between individuals, even within the same school contexts – a teacher may be powerful in her interaction with one parent, but much less so with another. Power imbalances in relationships within the parent body, and their potential effects on parental involvement in schools cannot be ignored either (cf. inter alia Levine Rasky 2009). It is, therefore, very difficult to generalise about power relationships, especially at individual levels with any degree of certainty.

Furthermore, notions of dual empowerment are unlikely to be attractive to powerful interests who are concerned with maintaining the status quo which has allowed them to access and exercise power. This defence can be accomplished through a variety of strategies (cf. Baecck 2010:325 citing Bourdieu; Vincent & Martin 2000:463; Bauch & Goldring 1998:28). Such is the capacity of powerful interests to exercise influence that they can subvert democratically inspired initiatives for their own ends. For example, Karila and Alsuutari (2012:23) described how Individual Education Plans, introduced with the intention of empowering parents in Finland, also served as ‘an instrument of governance’ through which power was exercised over parents. Notwithstanding the ability of the powerful to protect the status quo, Bourdieu (1993:73, cited by Baecck, 2010:325) claimed that existing power structures are eventually challenged by some crisis that manages to transform the existing system. In the Norwegian context, (Baecck 2010:325) suggested that the greater emphasis on parental involvement by policy-makers and parents may be enough to create this change, resulting in a ‘levelling out of the power balance between teachers and parents’. Since there has been a greater emphasis on parental involvement in Irish education as well in recent times, the potential to challenge existing power structures may also exist in Irish education.

‘Empowerment’ in a democratic sense then, is about more than giving parents the right to monitor and choose schools for their children, and does not imply that teacher power is reduced accordingly. Parent-teacher partnerships are advocated for the benefits they can bring to parents, students, teachers, schools, and society (cf. Comer 2005). The inclusion of parents in schools in meaningful ways is likely to enhance parental self-esteem, satisfaction and sense of belonging (Stelmach 2005:177), as well as increasing parental knowledge of the school and educational system (Bauch & Goldring 1998:30), and of democratic procedures and practices. These benefits of parental involvement are seen to apply across social, ethnic and gender groups (Jeynes 2003). Since democratic
constructions in their ideal form have a less individualistic underpinning than those of managerialism, collective empowerment resulting from parent-teacher partnerships is valued. This empowerment occurs through the ‘creation of a network of support’ (Evans & Shirley 2008:84), and may extend across schools. For example, Evans and Shirley related the story of parents of special needs students in Boston lobbying for changes to educational provision, describing the way parents moved from just considering the education of their own children, to considering the needs of the whole community, as they developed ‘collective moral leadership’. Evans and Shirley saw this collective empowerment as potentially having long-term beneficial effects for their communities. Giles (2006:274) reported similar findings from case studies of schools that had increased parental involvement, describing how, as a result, ‘groups of parents became more confident, self-actuating leaders’. From teacher perspectives too a sense of feeling empowered is likely to enhance teachers’ feelings of self-efficacy and in turn make them more likely to be open to engaging with parents in meaningful ways (cf. Bauch & Goldring 2000:7; Whitmore and Norton-Meier 2008:460).

2.4.4.2 Positioning of parents in democratic constructs of parent-teacher relations

Rather than the deficit approach apparent in traditional and managerial constructions, democratic understandings of the parent-teacher relationship recognise the potential contribution of each parent to the school, and involve parents actively in determining their own involvement, while also acknowledging the potential capacity building role of the school in its local community.

Democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations pose a major challenge to the deficit approaches to certain parents that are entrenched in traditional and managerial models. Rather genuine partnerships ‘recognise and validate that each family exists in an intellectually credible history, culture and language’ and view them ‘as wise and contributing members of the academic and intellectual culture’ (Whitmore & Norton Meier 2008:451, 460). Democratic parental involvement is envisaged from ‘a broad, multi-dimensional perspective that addresses emotional and personal aspects in addition to school activities’ (McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan & Moon-Ho 2004:2). To achieve this, teachers and schools need to focus on the potential resources and capabilities that all parents might have, rather than on what they are lacking (inter alia Hartas 2008:149; Wright & Smith 1998:157; Borg & Mayo 2001:261). This re-conceptualisation calls for ‘a realization that knowledge is not necessarily dependent on schooling’ (De Gaetano 2007:154), and for an appreciation of the value of ‘practical wisdom’ (Ranson 2012:42). Teachers must acknowledge the possibility that they too might learn from relationships with parents, rather than assuming that parents will be the only learners (Hargreaves 2000:174; also Johnston 2003:25 regarding cultural learning). The class-based deficit assumptions that are made in both traditional and managerial constructs of parent-teacher relationships are not compatible with democratic understandings, therefore.

The rejection of the deficit model does not deny, however, that parents and families will continue to need support and assistance from the school, as to do so would lead to further inequality.
Instead schools are required to adopt an approach that involves ‘enhancing strengths and protective factors’, taking the diversity of families and social and cultural differences into account, rather than trying to ‘make up the deficit’ (Eurofound 2012:11). Indeed, teachers’ responsibilities towards parents are at the heart of democratic teacher professionalism, and it has been suggested that the focus of parental involvement in this sense needs to be ‘less on what parents could do for schools, more on what schools could do for local parents and the community’ (Brain & Reid 2003:295; also Standing 1999b:67; Wright & Smith 1998:156). Arising from the rejection of the deficit model then is a model of ‘reciprocal supportiveness’ (Wright & Smith 1998:155, citing Haynes et al. 1989), where the school is positioned within its local community, and can use that community as a resource, as well as itself acting as a capacity builder for that local community. If as Davies (2000:42) stated, successful partnerships are based on reciprocity, this notion of parents and teachers learning from and with each other is of central importance to parent-teacher partnerships and, indeed, to democratic teacher professionalism. While positioning schools as capacity builders is undoubtedly challenging for them, it does acknowledge that schools are uniquely situated in society, as unlike other public institutions, they have on-going and everyday access to a large section of the local population, as well as having ‘a physical plant in almost every community, relatively stable funding, professional staff and the ability to network with other resources’ (Smith, Connell, Wright, Sizer, Norman, Hurley & Walker 1997:342). While some attempts have been made in recent years to harness the capacity building potential of schools in Ireland for their local communities, (cf. Circular 61/2008: Maximising community use of school premises and facilities) there appears to be scope to develop this much further, beyond utilising just the physical structures.

Positioning schools at the heart of their local communities in this reciprocal model poses a major challenge to market models of school choice, which place schools in competition with, rather than in collaboration with, aspects of their local communities. It also contrasts with the metaphor of the traditional school as ‘castle’ or ‘bubble’ (Riley & Stoll 2004:38). While this openness is generally presented as an unproblematic ideal in the literature, it may need to be explored further. It remains necessary, for instance, for schools to provide a safe learning environment for their pupils (Schultz 2008:295). Schools may have to protect students from problems in the local environment and Edwards & Warin (1999:328) noted the dangers of ‘the tying of schools too closely into the resources available within particular communities’. Perhaps also the potentially exclusionary and restrictive nature of communities (cf. Vincent 1997:279; Bauch 2001:212; Casanova 1996) is not adequately acknowledged within democratic professional discourses. This is especially pertinent at the time of writing given the so-called ‘Trojan Horse’ takeover of school management in Birmingham that received widespread attention in 2014 (cf. Phipps 2014; Gilligan 2014). Likewise, Close Conoley’s (1987:193) description of schools as open systems that need their boundaries ‘to screen what enters the system so that system is not overwhelmed and loses its integrative functioning’ is interesting. She suggests that a school (or family’s) apparent resistance to change may be ‘a product of the system-
maintaining function of its boundary, not necessarily a sign of pathology’. However, Gay and Place (2000:7) offer an alternative perspective as they explain how organisations that are open to their environment can prosper both by importing energy from the outside environment, and sensing changes so that they can adapt more easily. Their conclusion (citing Morgan 1986, Scott 1981) that ‘organisations need input from the environment in order to survive’ can perhaps be read as supportive of the outside influences offered by engagement with parents in meaningful ways. Care needs to be taken that the emphasis of democratic constructions of teacher professionalism on openness to parents and local communities does not deflect from teachers’ primary responsibility towards their pupils.

If schools and teachers are to fulfil their responsibilities towards the local community in the reciprocal model, the support and assistance that is provided to parents must be done in a respectful and empowering manner. The targeting of support at those parents who are perceived to need it most (usually working-class or minority parents), typical of traditional and managerial approaches, may serve to further embed deficit models. Wright and Smith (1998:150) noted the ‘subtle ways in which schools may communicate distrust and/or disrespect for parents and their approach to parenting’, among which they included initiatives that aim to ‘professionalise parents’. Since parent efficacy has been identified as crucial for the development of partnerships (Lazar & Slostad 1999:208), expressing distrust is likely to prove counter-productive. Powell (1991:314) discussed the adoption of a ‘wellness’ rather than ‘prevention’ approach to parents, through making parent support programmes universally available. Its usefulness as a strategy may be compromised, however, by the tendency of middle-class parents to compete more strongly and more successfully, for all available resources (Powell 1991:315) to the continuing detriment of high risk populations, and thereby returning to a more traditional construction of parent-teacher relations. Additionally, and most importantly perhaps, it has obvious resource implications, and raises questions about state welfare provision. Indeed, in the present Irish economic climate such an approach does not seem feasible. Hence, the challenge remains for democratic professionals to provide the necessary support to parents in a sensitive way, while still ensuring that ‘each partner is truly respected as having something valuable to contribute’ (Cochran & Dean 1991:267).

Attending to parental ‘dispositions’ (Edwards & Warin 1999:328) is likely to be central to providing support to parents in a respectful way. The active involvement of parents in the creation of parental involvement initiatives locates them as ‘active collaborators’ (Jowett et al. 1991:138) and, thus, avoids positioning parents as subject to the good intentions of teachers (Smrekar 1992:41). Borg and Mayo (2001:251) emphasised the need for school and teachers to ‘listen’, if they are to build bridges with working-class homes, a point also made by Stelmach (2005:183, citing Fine 1993), who distinguished between ‘giving parents a voice and giving them a hearing’. Parents need to value their own contributions, as Stelmach (2005:178) argued, ‘meaningful parental involvement can only come about when parents equate their knowledge and experience with those of the professionals’. Parental responsibilities were outlined by Hartas (2008:150), who described parental involvement as advocacy,
and as requiring ‘parents to identify their needs, recognise their strengths, challenge practices, negotiate decision-makings, express dissent and develop resolution’. While this is challenging, it does centre the importance of parent agency for parent-teacher partnerships. This recognition of parental agency results in parent-teacher relationships that are inherently more empowering than those of traditional or managerial constructs that tend to be ‘done to’ parents.

The acknowledgement of parental agency raises questions about ‘non-involved’ parents, as by definition partnerships have to involve both parents and teachers. Although democratic constructions of the parent-teacher relationship are less prescriptive about what constitutes the ‘good parent’, and aspire to be more culturally and socio-economically sensitive than traditional or managerial constructs, the dilemma of the ‘non-involved’ parent remains. Arguably, once schools and teachers have made all efforts to welcome and support the involvement of parents, if they are truly respectful of parents then the wishes of those parents who do not want to, or cannot, become actively involved in the school have to be accepted. Schultz’s (2008:294) point that different groups in society may need ‘safe spaces’ in which they can ‘refuse to engage in dialogue’ in order to oppose the power of dominant groups is relevant in this regard. Demanding participation from all parents may result in the school acting oppressively. The reality that it would not be feasible for every parent in a school to be involved in very active ways from a practical point of view (Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock & Lecklider 1999:35) also raises the possibility of tolerated non-involvement. It is notable that little attention is paid in the literature to this idea of acceptable non-involvement, however, and it is likely to be most problematic in relation to the involvement of the parent in the education of their own child, where the school’s duty to the child must be paramount.

2.4.5 Concluding comments on democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations

The above depictions of partnerships are demanding of participants, and there is evidence in the literature that such relationships are rare in schools (cf. inter alia Hobbins McGrath 2007). The situation may be complicated by the unwillingness of policy-makers, the public, parents and teachers, to seriously consider alternatives to present arrangements. There is a sense of future potential being constrained by past experiences (Dewey, cited by Schultz 2001:284). It is debatable whether it is possible to use existing constructs of parental involvement and teacher professionalism as stepping stones to partnership and democratic professionalism, or whether a radical re-conceptualisation is needed. If Epstein’s (1995:711) view of partnership as a ‘process not a single event’ is accepted, then possibly domain specific partnerships (Dom & Verhoeven 2006:585), although more characteristic of traditional teacher professionalism, might provide a stepping stone to genuine partnerships. While Vincent and Tomlinson (1997:366) were not enthusiastic about ‘narrowly defined roles’ for parents, perhaps domain specific partnerships might provide a way around teacher defensiveness and issues of the primacy of professional or personal knowledge. Feuerstein (2000:37), for instance, was optimistic that greater contact between parents and teachers, even within a traditional or managerial setting,
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might ‘hold promise’ for the future involvement of parents. That initially traditional or managerial relationships would turn into democratic ones is by no means inevitable, however.

Given the opposing nature of managerial and democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations, it is reasonable to assume that the strength of managerialism internationally poses a significant challenge to the development of genuine parent-teacher partnerships. However, the understanding that activist professionalism is ‘emerging in response to and perhaps in reaction against managerialism’ (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002:352), suggests another perspective, in that managerialism can be regarded as spurring on democratic constructions of teacher professionalism. If teachers realise the limiting effects of managerialism they may be inspired to engage with notions of democratic re-professionalisation. Since Sachs was adamant that such democratic professionalism must emerge from within the teaching profession rather than being externally mandated, this countering of managerialism also provides an intrinsic motivation for such engagement. Although Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002:356) were optimistic about this possibility, Hayes (2001:49, cited by Webb et al. 2004:102) was not, stating ‘it is difficult to see how creative, innovative teachers will flower from the gravel beds of efficiency, targets, outputs and measurable criteria’. Nonetheless, the potential that democratic discourses will emerge seems to be present.

2.5 Closing observations regarding the three potential discourses of parent-teacher relations identified from the literature review

It has been contended above that the three main discourses of teacher professionalism, namely traditional, managerial and democratic teacher professionalism, guide understandings of what it is to be a ‘good teacher’ and ‘good parent’ and accordingly influence definitions of ‘good’ parent-teacher relations. These understandings of ‘good’ affect the relationships that parents and teachers develop with each other in schools, such that it is possible to discuss parent-teacher relations in terms of traditional, managerial and democratic constructions, albeit that the intertwined and changing nature of discourses needs to be borne in mind, as does the likelihood that different actors perceive and interpret discourses differently depending on their own prior experiences and understandings.

Much of the literature reviewed draws on British and American sources, with little specific reference to Ireland found. While efforts were made above to draw some parallels between international and Irish contexts, given the myriad of cultural, political and social differences in existence among education systems, this can only be done very tentatively in the absence of an in-depth examination of the discourses surrounding parental involvement in Ireland. It is essential, therefore, to identify the sources, transmission and constructing force with regard to parent-teacher relations of the various discourses that are at work at different levels and different aspects of the Irish primary education system.

While it is generally agreed that discourse plays an important role in influencing practice, this is a complex and multi-faceted process, as the connections between policy and practice are not always
straightforward or linear in nature. The policies that arise in light of particular discourses may be implemented or resisted in practice, depending on the discourses and understandings prevalent at other levels of the system. As MacBeath (2012:109) noted, even the most ambitious policy blueprints fail to materialise ‘without the engagement of those closest to the action’ – in this case parents and teachers. An examination of the implications arising in practice from the various discourses identified will, therefore, be necessary to achieve a thorough understanding, or at least one interpretation of it, of the discursive construction of parent-teacher relations in Irish education.

The above identification of discourses, their implications for parent-teacher relations, and how these transfer in practice to relationships between teachers and parents, should allow for an interrogation of the concept of parent-teacher partnership (in the democratic sense) in Irish education. This permits an examination of what it involves for parents and teachers, where it is present, who aspires to it, what factors are resisting it, the alternations that need to be made, discursively or structurally, and how these might be accomplished, if genuine partnership is to develop across the education system.

2.6 The theoretical frame

The preceding section has outlined how various understandings of teaching and teacher professionalism serve to construct the parent-teacher relationship in different ways. It has been argued from a social constructivist perspective that notions of the ‘good parent’ and ‘good teacher’ are powerful in determining how parents and teachers interact with each other, but that definitions of ‘good’ can vary, due to differing discourses and the discursive background of participants. The contention that discourse has the power to determine what is perceived as being true, acceptable and appropriate in various situations is grounded in discourse theory (cf. Gee 2011a, 2011b; Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2008; Wetherell, Taylor & Yates 2001a, 2001b; Wodak & Meyer 2009; Milliken 1999). Hence, the approach to discourse and policy that underpins this study is discussed below. Conceptualising policy-as-discourse allows for ‘critical policy discourse analysis’ (Hyatt 2013) to be undertaken, and this is discussed in Section 2.6.3. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research questions, and how they are to be explored through the critical policy discourse analysis approach.

2.6.1 Discourse theory

This section outlines the key principles of Foucauldian discourse theory that influenced the present study, beginning with a definition of discourse as involving more than linguistics. The claims that legitimating principles impose discursive limits, that discourse is productive, and that discourse disciplines its subjects, are discussed, as are Foucauldian concepts of power relations, the means through which discourses become dominant, and the inter-discursive nature of discourse.
2.6.1.1 Foucauldian influences

The approach taken to discourse theory in this study is particularly influenced by Foucauldian perspectives, and as such involves a critical approach to discourse analysis. Popkewitz and Brennan (1998:4) defined critical approaches as being concerned with ‘issues of power and the political’, involving ‘a broad band of disciplined questioning of the ways in which power works through the discursive practices and performances’, and as being concerned with ‘how the marginalisation of people is constructed and the various ways in which power operates’.

As Threadgold’s (2003:16-21) account of the development of Critical Discourse Analysis demonstrates, critical approaches to discourse arose from the work of many researchers and theorists, such as Fowler, Kress, Hodge, Trew, Fairclough and Van Dijk, among others. They are built upon earlier approaches to language, power and discourse, perhaps most notably Halliday’s systemic functional grammar and Sacks’ conversational analysis (cf. McHoul & Grace 1993:26-29). As is elaborated in Section 3.3.2 the field of discourse theory is a complex and diverse one. Some have conceptualised it as being comprised of various ‘schools’ of discourse analysis, in which theorists from similar theoretical backgrounds, orientated towards similar data and methodologies, and relying on similar grammatical approaches tend to cluster together (cf. Wodak & Meyer 2009:5). Threadgold (2003), for example, differentiated between the Critical Linguistics movement based in the University of East Anglia in the 1970s, the social semiotic movement in Australia from the 1980s and 1990s, British Critical Discourse Analysis associated with Fairclough (cf. inter alia 2001b) and the European critical analysis movement associated with Van Dijk (cf. inter alia 1993). Others have sought to differentiate the field on the grounds of research strategies adopted. Wodak and Meyer (2009:20), for instance, distinguished between the Discourse Historical Approach, Corpus-Linguistics Approach, Social Actors Approach, Dispositive Analysis, Sociocognitive Approach and Dialectical-Relational Approach. As is evident from Section 3.3.2, however, different approaches are taken in terms of classifying discourse studies and there is debate as to the place of various scholars in the networks of discourse analysis (cf. Rogers, Malanchravul-Berkes, Mosley, Hui & O’Garro Joseph 2005:377).

While it is likely that analyses undertaken within the broad structures of each of the various schools might differ in their emphases and approaches from each other, the overarching influence of Foucault on the field of critical discourse studies is generally not disputed. Indeed, Wodak and Meyer (2009:10) described Foucault as being among the ‘theoretical godfathers’ of critical discourse analysis. His theories underpin the work of diverse discourse analysts such as Fairclough (Rogers 2004b:5), Kress (Rogers 2004c:7) and Gee (Rogers 2004a:7). According to Allen (2012), Foucault himself did not wish his work to be used as a ‘general system’ but rather as a ‘toolbox from which others can extract those parts that are of use to them’, which explains the broad nature of his influence. Despite the sense of critical discourse analysis having ‘several histories’ (Threadgold 2003:17), Foucault’s contribution is central to understanding from a critical perspective what discourse is and how it operates in society. Accordingly it is Foucauldian theories of discourse, knowledge and power
that are discussed below. Given the centrality of power relations within discourses of parent-teacher relations, Foucauldian perspectives provide a particularly useful theoretical frame through which to further the research.

2.6.1.2 Definition of discourse in Foucauldian terms

Foucault’s work on power and discourse is widely credited (cf. McHoul and Grace 1993:26/27; Hall 2001:72) with moving discourse analysis (as it had been previously understood by formal and empirical approaches), away from a focus on linguistic systems and grammar, towards a consideration of the disciplinary aspects of discourse. Consequently, many aspects of practice and institutional regulation are included in Foucault’s concept of discourse (Hall 2001:78). This broader notion of discourse has been very influential in the development of critical approaches to discourse analysis, as is evident from Gee’s (2011a:201) description of ‘Big D Discourses’; ‘ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of recognisable identity’, or as he puts it more colloquially ‘language together with other “stuff” that isn’t language’. From a Foucauldian perspective then, ‘text’ can be viewed as ‘the multi-semiotic manifestation of discoursal meaning(s)’ (Lazar 2000:377). Some discourse analysts, such as those using a dispositive approach, oppose this Foucauldian understanding of discourse because of the tendency to include non-linguistic elements within analysis (cf. Wodak & Meyer 2009:25). Furthermore, the Foucauldian tendency to analyse the ‘whole discursive formation to which a text or practice belongs’ (Hall 2001:78) has resulted in Critical Discourse Analysis approaches being criticised for being too broadly focussed, and not making an adequate connection between macro- and micro-level analyses (Luke 1995:10). This omission seems particularly unfortunate given the emphasis Foucault placed on the micro-physics of power (Popkewitz & Brennan 1998:24) and accordingly on the need to engage in micro-level analysis.

Despite the move away from linguistic analysis that is associated with Foucault, however, language remains central to Critical Discourse Analysis as ‘the constant unity of language and other social matters ensures that language is entwined in social power in a number of ways’ and so the relation between language and power is a ‘permanent topic’ (Wodak & Meyer 2009:10).

2.6.1.3 Legitimating principles of discourse

Foucault’s approach to discourse differed from earlier ones, not only because of this broader conception of discourse as being more than just language-based, but also because he conceptualised discourse as being whatever constrains, but also enables, writing, speaking and thinking within specific historical limits (McHoul & Grace 1993:31). He was, therefore, less interested in the ‘techniques, the structures, the forms of know-how by which people are able to produce and recognise utterances’ and more interested in how and why people were facilitated or inhibited in saying or thinking particular things (McHoul & Grace 1993:35/6; also Hall 2001:72). The main thrust of Foucault’s approach to discourse analysis is seeking to look below the surface of how things are said,
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to identify what can or cannot be said and why, in particular contexts. It examines the ‘historical and political legitimating principles’ that determine what it is safe and appropriate to say in certain circumstances, and the ways that people ‘try to affect the boundaries of what can be said and what is silenced in the discourse’ (Jóhannesson 2010:252). McCloskey (2008:28) summarised the discourse analysis approach to research as ‘needing to explore the relationship between text and reality, making visible the discourse, its point of origin, how it circulates and what it accomplishes’; consequently, text has to be constantly questioned at a number of levels. Jäger and Maier (2009:38) were careful to contrast single texts, which may have little effect, with discourses, whose ‘recurring contents, symbols and strategies’ can cause the ‘solidification of knowledge’ and result in lasting, long-term effects.

2.6.1.4 Constructive nature of discourse

Whereas earlier approaches to discourse emphasised the constructed nature of discourse, Foucault emphasised its constructing role (Luke 1995:8). He saw discourse as being central to meaning-making, arguing that it is discourse, rather than objects themselves, which produce knowledge (cf. Hall 2001:73). This does not deny the actual existence of objects outside of discourse, but suggests that they only take on meaning within discourse. Jäger and Maier (2009:37) explained how the productive power of discourse operates; ‘Firstly discourses form individual and mass consciousness and thereby constitute individual and collective subjects. Secondly, since consciousness determines action, discourses determine action’. The different discourses present in society direct people’s understanding in particular ways and, consequently, affect their behaviour (McCloskey 2008:26). Through their interactions with each other, people ‘construct, modify and maintain what their society holds to be true, real and meaningful’ (Zeeman, Poggenpoel, Myburgh & Van der Linds 2002:98). Institutional arrangements are affected by what is termed possible/impossible, good/not good in policy and discourse (Ravead & van Zanten 2007:108, citing van Zanten 2004; also Ball 1994). In this way discourses are more than abstract concepts, as they exist in all social situations and have ‘very real effects’ (Zeeman et al. 2002:98), exerting power as they regulate and reinforce action (Jäger & Maier 2009:35). Discourses then ‘do not merely reflect reality. Rather discourses not only shape but even enable (social) reality’ (Jäger & Maier 2009:36). The terminology and descriptions used within discourses can, therefore, have essentialising effects (cf. Ball 1997a).

McHoul and Grace (1993:48) discussed the idea of the productive nature of discourse in terms of human subjects, and how they are positioned by discursive conditions that ‘set up specific places or positions in which subjects can form’; for example ‘patients’ or ‘doctors’ (or ‘parents’ and ‘teachers’ for the purposes of this study). Therefore, ‘discourse is not simply the means by which a human subject – existing prior to the discourse – expresses itself or accomplishes something’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:48), as discourse has an effect on the identity and positioning of that subject themselves, and controls how topics can be reasoned about or talked about meaningfully (Hall 2001:72). ‘From a discourse-theoretical point of view it is thus not the subject who makes the discourses, but the
discourses that make the subject’ (Jäger & Maier 2009:37). The idea that ‘the subject is produced within discourse’ was described by Hall (2001:79) as being one of Foucault’s most radical propositions. It suggests that while subjects may produce texts, they can only do so within the limits of the discursive conditions of their particular time and place. It is impossible, according to this reasoning, for an individual to be outside of discourse, as that individual ‘must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge’ (Hall 2001:79). Krzyzanowski (2011:284, citing Abélès 2000:35) discussed the ‘action trap’ of engrenage, in which one action leads onto another and so individuals end up going in directions that they did not necessarily intend, gradually losing their individual agency within institutional practices. This position is of interest when considering parent-teacher relations, as it suggests that embedded assumptions about parent-teacher interactions may make it difficult for people to see alternatives; ‘what we can imagine (let alone put into practice) is both permitted and constrained by the discursive….possibilities at our disposal’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:34). The idea of being constrained or blinded by existing discourses also has implications for the critical researcher who is endeavouring to examine discourse from alternative perspectives, as no critique can ever be situated outside of discourse, with the ‘values, norms, laws and rights’ to which an analyst might refer, being themselves discursively constructed as well (Jäger & Maier 2009:36).

The notion of the productive nature of discourse has implications for the concept of truth, as ‘truth becomes a function of what can be said, written or thought’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:33) rather than verifiable reality. It is the discourse that establishes what is perceived as ‘truth’ at particular moments (Carabine 1993:268), and so ‘contradictory discourses about what is normal, right and best circulate and compete with each other in a society at a given point’ (MacNaughton 1998:160). Resulting from this understanding of discourse, Foucault (1980:131) spoke of discursive constructions that contained ‘a régime of truth’ rather than truth in an absolute, unchanging sense. The value of discourses, therefore, does not lie in the ‘truth’ that they contain, but rather in ‘their place, their capacity for circulation and their possibility of transformation’ (Van Dijk 2001:322, citing Foucault 1972). Discourse analysis is more about identifying dominance than truth, as truth and knowledge are ‘conditional’ rather than absolute (Jäger & Maier 2009:34). This understanding of truth as being discursively formed means that the discourse analyst must always be aware that their findings consist of just one interpretation of many possible regimes of truth, and that they are not looking to ‘reveal the true meaning by what is said or not said’ (Graham 2007:198, citing Foucault 1972:134), but rather they are examining statements as much for what they accomplish in terms of supporting a particular version of ‘truth’ as for what they say. Since interpretations can be more or less plausible, but the researcher cannot be certain they are fully correct, a hermeneutic approach to the presentation of findings in discourse work is necessary (Wodak 1999:187).
Disciplinary effects of discourse

The disciplinary power of discourse is an important theme in Foucault’s work. This disciplining is accomplished by the way in which discourses ‘establish the norm’ (Carabine 2001:277), and ‘institutionalise and regulate ways of talking, thinking and acting’ (Jäger & Maier 2009:35). Through the construction of ‘truths’ about the social or natural world (Luke 1995:9), discourse allows for the creation of systems and hierarchies through which the behaviour and achievements of people can be judged as normal or abnormal, and compared with that of others (Gutting 2005:84). Groups, people and actions can thereby be ‘othered’ (McKay & Garrett 2013:742; Janks 1997:334) as more or less acceptable. Certain concepts of ‘truth’ come to predominate or are ‘naturalized’ (Woodside-Jiron 2011:178), and since dominant discourses are usually ‘so entrenched in the everyday life’ (McCloskey 2008:27) that they go unnoticed, people are often unaware of the influences of particular discourses upon their own thinking. Teo (2000:9) described how people’s perceptions can be ‘tinted’ in ‘a subtle, almost sublime way’, by the seemingly routine and unremarkable discourses encountered every-day. While the resulting norms may be used by people in authority to regulate and rank the behaviour of others, arguably they have most power in the way people internalise them as taken-for-granted assumptions and use them to monitor and define their own behaviour (Foucault 1980), an occurrence that Luke (1995:9) described as ‘non-coercive discipline par excellence’. This ‘internal training’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:67) was explained by Foucault in terms of the panoptic prison where a sense of being under constant surveillance results in ‘docile bodies’ that are willing to conform to the established norms, even when the body is not actually under surveillance (cf. Foucault 1980:146-165). Discourse then, disciplines through a ‘new mechanism of power’ (Foucault 1980:104), as people are no longer physically constrained, nor subjected to violence as they might have been in the past, but an awareness of what is normal/abnormal ensures that people self-regulate to remain within the parameters of that discursively constructed normality. Normative values are, according to Fendler (1998:40), ‘pieces of evidence that give clues as to how power has been exercised’. Normalising judgement is a ‘peculiarly pervasive means of control’ (Gutting 2005:84), which is ‘inordinately difficult to resist’ (Graham 2007:202).

It is notable for the present study that Jóhannesson (2010:253) described the ‘normalization’ power of discourse as being particularly applicable to professionals who have been trained to adjust ‘to the demands constituted in the discourse’ and, therefore, ‘accept a variety of ideas and practices as professional truth’, and ‘may even participate in silencing other ideas’. This notion is useful when considering how discourses of teacher professionalism may act on those of parental involvement in schools. Likewise, it is through this process that ideas such as what it is to be a ‘good parent’ may have effect; ‘the more parents believe that all parents should be involved in their children’s education, the more likely they are to be involved themselves’ while a ‘sense of social pressure’ (Sheldon 2002:312) may silence alternative understandings of ‘good’. McKay and Garrett (2013) provided a list of examples of how parental involvement in the UK has been ‘classified’, then ‘normalised’ and,
finally, ‘governed’ through policy discourses; thus, the notion of the disciplinary power of discourse is relevant when considering parental involvement.

2.6.1.6 Power relations in discursive constructions

Importantly for understanding the potential disciplinary power of discourse, Foucault’s theory of power relations conceived of power as circulating in a ‘net-like organisation’, and he described individuals as being ‘the vehicles of power, not its points of application’ (Foucault 1980:98) which suggests that ‘we are all, to some degree, caught up in its circulation – oppressors and oppressed’ (Hall 2001:77). Foucault disputed the idea that power was a quantifiable concept, that could be possessed by certain individuals and used to control others, or that it radiated in a linear movement from a central authoritative source (Foucault 1977:27, cited by McHoul & Grace 1993:39). Thus, for Foucault, according to McHoul and Grace (1993:84):

‘Power is nothing more and nothing less than the multiplicity of force relations extant within the social body. Power’s conditions of possibility actually consist of this moving substrate of force relations: the struggles, confrontations, contradictions, inequalities and integrations of these force relations’.

This concept of power relations highlights the ‘many localized circuits, tactics, mechanisms, and effects through which power circulates’ (Hall 2001:77); accordingly it allows for the possibility of discourse and counter discourse exerting an influence on society. It acknowledges the capillary power effects operating within discourse, as Jäger and Maier (2009:38) described; ‘everyone is producing discourse, but no single individual or group controls discourse or has precisely intended its final result. Discourses take on a life of their own as they evolve’. The net-like conception of power also recommends that power relations be examined in an ascending rather than descending manner, given that ‘hegemonic or global forms of power rely in the first instance on those infinitesimal practices, composed of their own particular techniques and tactics, which exist in those institutions on the fringes or at the micro-level of society’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:90). This understanding of the ‘micro-powers’ (Foucault 1980:71) that ‘go right down to the depth of society’ (Hall 2001:77, citing Foucault 1977:27) supports the need for research that examines micro-level issues in society such, for instance, as those relating to parent-teacher relationships. Furthermore, given the sometimes oblique ways in which power can be exercised, it is particularly relevant ‘to acknowledge the effects of the power, the direction of the power and the ways in which we are ‘disciplined’ by participation’ (Irving & English 2008:115), with regard to discourses of partnership or collaboration, such as often form part of the concept of parental involvement in schools.

Foucault argued that knowledge is always a form of power (Hall 2001:76), and he made an ‘essential link between power relations and their capacity to produce the truths we live by’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:58). He was interested in identifying how power relations influenced what is regarded as ‘truth’ at any particular time, and especially in relation to ‘those ensembles of knowledge previously
thought to be either relatively independent of power …or linked only in a vague or inadequate way to political institutions’ (McHoul & Grace 1993:60). Therefore, while rejecting the idea of power as being in the possession of an elite, Foucault did not deny that certain sectors of society may have positions of dominance (Hall 2001:77) and, consequently, be able to exercise power to influence discourse and practice more so than those in less dominant positions. If discourse has a constitutive role in society and culture, then this power to influence discourse is likely to be a very important one. Power then ‘is not only negative, ruling, prohibiting, censoring, and uniform domination, but also positive, productive and creative’ (Simola et al. 1998: 64, citing Foucault 1990). Critical perspectives are concerned with how power is exercised in and through discourse creation, paying attention to the ‘dynamics of power, knowledge, and ideology that surround discursive practices’ (Irving & English, 2008:108). Unsurprisingly, those with access to power in society are those with the most capacity to create dominant discourses (McCloskey 2008:26, citing Mills 1997), through which the minds and actions of others can be influenced, often with the intention of maintaining the status quo. McGregor (2003:2) noted the power of dominant discourse to ‘interpret conditions, issues, and events in favour of the elite’, and described how ‘our words are politicized, even if we are not aware of it, because they carry the power that reflects the interests of those who speak’. Similarly, McCloskey (2008:27) explained how all discourse is ideologically invested; therefore, texts and language are ‘local examples of ideology in practice’, albeit that Jäger and Maier (2009:37) emphasised that discourses were more than ‘mere ideology’ as they produce ‘subjects and reality’. Education systems are likely to be fruitful places to explore the exercise of power through the promulgation of dominant discourses; indeed, Apple (1992:4) described education and power as ‘terms of an indissoluble couplet’.

The differential access people have to different identities and practices, and the connection between these and different status and social goods, was identified by Gee (2011a:30) as ‘a root source of inequality in society’. The identification of power relations may assist, therefore, in resolving social problems, given that discourse has a role in producing and maintaining social inequalities through the way in which it allows for the retention and consolidation of certain power relations (Fairclough 2000b; McCloskey 2008:26). Since power, no matter how permanent and dominant it may appear ‘can only be effective in certain groups or in individuals in certain situations, and at certain times’ (McCloskey 2008:26, citing Van Dijk 1997), the possibility that discourses can be altered to improve social equality does appear to exist. Much emphasis is placed internationally on the possibilities offered by parental involvement to overcome educational disadvantage, so examining the assumptions and implications of the discourse surrounding it may enhance our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of parental involvement in creating a more equal and just society.

2.6.1.7 Agency within discursive constructions

As Foucault’s emphasis on ‘micro powers’ suggests, and notwithstanding his emphasis on the productive and constitutive role of discourse and discursive norms in society, the constructed nature of
discourse is not denied. Rather discourse and other elements of social practices have to be viewed in terms of a ‘dialectical relationship’ (Chiapello & Fairclough 2002:185; Fairclough 2002), as language influences the contexts in which it occurs, but those contexts also influence language production (Rogers et al 2005:369). This allows for ‘power over discourse’ as well as ‘power in discourse’ (Jäger & Maier 2009). The potential for individual agency is not disputed, therefore. Discourses, as ‘instruments and effects of power’, can be ‘appropriated to develop opposing strategies’ (Grimaldi 2012:452). In keeping with this understanding, Gale (1999:400) explained how ‘discourse is both a tool of constraint and of agency’, as discourses always contain contradictions that can be ‘mobilised’ by individuals. Davies and Harré (2001:270), similarly, discussed the association between discursive contradictions, choices and the possibility of agency. Hardy (2014) provided a description of teacher agency in the face of dominant managerial discourses in the UK, noting how the exercise of such agency is an inherent feature of practice contexts, rather than being explained merely in terms of a ‘heroic individual’ (p 503). This acknowledgement of agency is an important aspect of discursive work, in that it provides scope for individuals and contexts of practice to be self-scrutinising and self-improving, rather than completely submissive to dominant discourse constructions (cf. Hardy 2014).

2.6.1.8 Strategies of discursive legitimation

Given the potential for exercise of agency and micro power, discourse cannot be envisaged as operating in society in a direct or linear process nor, indeed, does it serve to create passive uniformity. Prevailing culture and society (the ‘sedimentation of institutions’, and ‘the habituses of people’, Fairclough 2003:24) ‘influence how people accept, resist, and negotiate discourses, accounting for shared representations, cognitions and ideologies’ (McCloskey 2008:26, citing Potter & Wetherell 1987), and so ‘there are no guarantees of such constructive effects’ (Fairclough 2003:24). Discourses are powerful through the ways in which people ‘receive, interpret and use’ (McCloskey 2008:27) them; thus, ‘a text, a description of something that is happening in a larger social context replete with a complex set of power relations, is interpreted and acted upon by readers or listeners depending on their rules, norms, and mental models of socially acceptable behaviour’ (McGregor 2003:4). Luke (1995:9) noted how ‘communities participate in discourse in local, often idiosyncratic ways, both resisting and becoming complicit in their own moral regulation’. Accordingly, ‘not all discourses and differences make substantive differences in complex and overlapping social, economic and cultural institutions and systems’ (Luke 1995:20). Van Leeuwen (2007) outlined four major strategies through which discourses achieve legitimacy; through being perceived as authorised by influential people or institutions, through being evaluated as being ‘better’ than alternative discourses, through being justified by their goals, uses, effects, or ‘naturalness’ and through narratives and stories that demonstrate the ‘goodness’ of the discourse (mythopoesis). At certain times and in certain contexts then for a variety of reasons, certain discourses have a greater effect in determining the norm than others, and the strength of discourses may vary as circumstances and other discourses change.
2.6.1.9 Inter-discursivity

Although for explanatory and research purposes it may be necessary to attempt to identify and categorise particular discourses or discourse strands separately from each other, in reality discourses never exist in isolation from each other, but are interconnected, interdependent and intertwined. ‘Discourses always connect to other discourses that are produced earlier, as well as those produced synchronically and subsequently’ (McCloskey 2008:27), and even seemingly oppositional threads of discourse may be ‘braided together’ (Lazar 2000:397). Luke (1995:15) noted how ‘discourses are dynamic and cross fertilizing, continually relocated and regenerated in everyday texts’; similarly, Carabine (2001:269) described discourses as ‘fluid and often opportunistic….drawing upon existing discourses about an issue whilst utilizing, interacting with and being mediated by other dominant discourses ….. to produce potent and new ways of conceptualising the issue or topic’. She identified this inter-discursivity as another productive characteristic of discourse. This productive nature is also evoked in Jäger and Maier’s (2009:35) depiction; ‘Different discourses are intimately entangled with each other and together form the giant milling mass of overall societal discourse. This milling mass of discourse is growing constantly and exuberantly’. Hardy’s (2014:500) findings with regard to inter-discursivity even between apparently opposing versions of teacher professionalism is of particular relevance to the current study, as he noted the ‘concurrent nature’ of democratic and managerial influences on teachers in the United Kingdom. Given then that parent-teacher relations are influenced by many complicated and interdependent factors, a discourse perspective that allows for inter-discursivity is an appropriate one through which to explore the topic of parental involvement in education.

2.6.1.10 Concluding comments about discourse theory

The above described key principles underpin the approach to discourse that influenced the research process in this study. In seeking to use Foucauldian discourse theory, the difficulties and debate surrounding the feasibility of delineating an explicitly ‘Foucauldian’ approach to discourse (cf. Graham 2005; McLaren 2009; Allen 2012; Hook 2001) are not denied. It would be unfortunate, however, to allow argument about what is or is not ‘Foucauldian’ distract from the usefulness of Foucault’s theories of discourse for this study. That others might take a different approach in applying Foucault’s theories in research is acknowledged, but not deemed problematic for the purposes of the present study. Indeed, of itself this demonstrates much about the nature of Foucauldian discourse, in that various readers of Foucault must participate in making meaning for themselves from his theories, rather than being passively or uniformly subject to them (Ball 2006:5, citing Walzer 1988). Hence, the approach adopted in this study expresses one version of such meaning-making.

In employing these key principles of discourse in the analysis of policies and practices of Irish education, much of the research necessarily focussed on educational policy documents as data sources. A specific consideration of the discursive nature of policy is, therefore, appropriate.
2.6.2. Discursive nature of policy

The application of discourse theory, such as that described above, to policy analysis results in a critical perspective on policy that understands policy to be more than authoritative documents, but rather involving ‘individuals, groups, practices, events, ideas, power, struggles and compromises’ (Winton 2013:159, citing Ball 1994; also Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992). In other words it conceptualises ‘policy-as-discourse’ as well as ‘policy-as-text’ (Ball 1994a; Bacchi 2000). Arising from this, policy is seen to be complex, inherently political and infused with values (Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992). Policy problems are seen as social constructions as much as objective problems (Edelmann 1988, cited by Winton 2013:159) and so policy can be considered ‘not as a response to existing conditions and problems, but more as a discourse in which both problems and solutions are created’ (Goodwin 1996:67, cited by Bacchi 2000:48). Policies have a role in creating social realities, rather than just reflecting them (Nuzdor 2009:507). Policy-making then can be viewed as ‘an arena of struggle over meaning’, with policy texts representing the outcome of those political struggles (Taylor 1997:26, Hyatt 2013:5). The ‘policy as discourse’ approach allows for a sophisticated analysis of the difference between policy and practice that is often apparent in schools (cf. Grimaldi 2012). Rather than viewing this difference merely as a ‘gap’ or failure of implementation, it acknowledges the relevance of competing discourses (Taylor 1997:32). It allows for ‘the identification of resistance, accommodation, subterfuge and conformity within and between the arenas of practice and the plotting of clashes and mishmashes between contending discourses at work in these arenas’ and helps reveal the ‘ambiguities, contradictions and omissions’ that allow those in policy implementation contexts ‘space for manoeuvre’ (Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992:13-14). As with all critical approaches, critical policy research is interested in challenging inequalities by understanding the role of policies in perpetuating them (Winton 2013:159).

2.6.2.1 Policy cycle model

Bowe, Ball with Gold’s (1992) oft-cited ‘policy cycle model’ is helpful when considering the discursive nature of policy. The original model posits that the policy process is characterised by three contexts: of Practice; of Policy Text Production; and most pertinently for the present research, of Influence. It is important to note, however, that the contexts cannot be strictly separated from each other, nor should they be regarded as static or unchanging.

Context of Practice

It is in the Context(s) of Practice (primarily schools in the present research) that the consequences of policy (discourse and text) can be seen, and where the contradictions, tensions and challenges of policy are most likely to be perceived. With regard to the education system, Gale (2003:56, citing Lawton 1986, Yeatman 1998) specified professionals and other school staff as those most active in this context, with the productive activity of the context centred on policy implementation and policy delivery. In the policy cycle understanding of the policy process, these
activities involve more than a passive reception and enacting of policy texts, but rather involve an
active interpretation and re-creation of them as well (Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992:22). No matter how
hard policy writers try to ensure that readers acquire the ‘correct’ interpretation from the texts, they
can never fully control the multiple interpretations that multiple readers will make from the same
document, whether through misunderstanding, rejection or selective reading (cf. Taylor 1997:26). The
readers of a text will bring their own histories, experiences, values and purposes to their reading of it,
as well as which many have vested interests in understanding the policy text, and the problem it
addresses, in specific ways. Furthermore, since many practitioners tend not to read original policy
texts in the first instance, (cf. Ball 1994a:17), they are often dependent on someone else’s
interpretation for what they need in their daily practice, and this reliance on ‘interpretations of
interpretations’ (Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992:23) has obvious consequences in terms of moving policy
responses away from policy text writers’ intentions. People in the Context of Practice can be regarded
as ‘policy actors’ then rather than ‘passive implementers’ (Winton 2013:172). This is not to state,
however, that policy texts are unimportant, and Ball (1994a:18) stressed the point that polices ‘are
textual interventions into practice’ and practitioners’ ‘readings and reactions are not constructed in
circumstances of their own making’. Therefore, policy texts ‘pose problems to their subjects, problems
that must be solved in context’.

While it may be necessary in research to analyse the Context of Practice in which policies are
situated in general terms as a single, if multi-faceted context, nonetheless, the multiple nature of the
Contexts of Practice to which most educational policy applies cannot be denied. It is readily apparent
that Contexts of Practice in terms of policy interpretation and re-creation will differ according to the
characteristics of those contexts themselves. As Bowe, Ball with Gold (1992) explained, the ‘micropolitical processes’ (p85) of schools, and the ‘micro-markets’ (p164) in which schools are located ensure that interpretations of policy ‘are not unconstrained, do not develop in a vacuum and a variety
of exigencies’ impact on them (p85). They noted in particular the importance of institutional capacities,
contingencies, commitments and histories in determining response to policy at school level. That
multiple contexts of practice in terms of policy response may exist within the one school context, or
even within the one individual, was described by Bowe, Ball with Gold (1992:149) with reference to
Foucault’s notion of ‘heterotopia’ or the ‘large number of fragmentary possible worlds’ that can
develop, particularly in times of rapid or major policy change. The multiplicity of Contexts of Practice
further reduces the capacity of those active in the Context of Policy Text Production to pre-determine
the consequences of policy in every setting.

Context of Policy Text Production

The Context of Policy Text Production is arguably the easiest to conceptualise given the
tangible nature of the policy documents produced within it, by bureaucrats or public officials (Gale
2003:56 ), and also by interest groups, supra-national organisations, think-tanks, etc. Policy texts can
take many forms, from official legal documents, to papers produced either formally or informally to help people make sense of the official texts, to speeches and public performance by ministers and others as well as media releases (Winton 2013:160). They can be regarded both as ‘products and tools of production’ of discourse (Gale 1999:394), as policy-as-text and policy-as-discourse are ‘implicit in each other’ (Ball 1994a:15). Policy texts, while they may ‘constitute the official discourse of the state’ (Codd 1988:237, cited by Taylor 1997:26), are not of themselves the totality of policy, rather they are a representation of complex processes involving the interaction of (and often struggle and compromise between) the Contexts of Practice, Production and Influence (Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992:20). Policy texts are ‘produced discursively within particular contexts whose parameters and particulars have been temporarily (and strategically) settled by the discourse(s) in dominance’ (Gale 1999:405). As a result of these complex processes, policy documents are not necessarily either coherent or clear, and can be both internally and externally contradictory and conflicting (Ball 1998:126). Given that achieving public acceptance must be a major concern of policy if it is to have any chance of being implemented successfully, policy texts are usually articulated in the language of the common good and rational logic. Since policy documents have to be written in generalised format, and usually in ‘ideal world’ terms, they have to be re-interpreted for the specific circumstances of each context of practice, hence, allowing space for practitioners to be policy actors as well.

Notwithstanding the above, the extent to which policy texts seek to, and achieve, directly mandated actions in the Context of Practice can be seen to be influenced by the specific policy area in question. For instance, Child Protection policies in Irish education have very little scope for reinterpretation or resistance at practitioner level, both due to the commanding form of the texts themselves, and the accompanying discourses which ensure that there is little appetite to resist them in any event. In certain policy areas then the policy elite or practitioners may have more or less power to construct, interpret and implement policy. This acknowledgement that ‘balance of power between macro constraint and micro agency would be expected to vary with different policies’ (Vidovich 2007:292) appears particularly relevant when considering policies relating to parental involvement and parent-teacher relations in light of the scope that individual parents and teachers have to exercise agency in their interactions with each other, even if the formal procedures of parent-teacher interactions are mandated.

Context of Influence

It is in the Context of Influence that public policy is initiated and policy discourses and lexicons are constructed. Hence, this context is very relevant when undertaking discourse analysis. It is here that policy concepts are established and acquire currency and credence (Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992:19). As well as applying to policy responses and solutions, arguably this process of influence also pertains to the construction of policy problems themselves (Bacchi 2000:50). Bowe, Ball with Gold (1992:19-20) noted how the influencing of policy can take place in private arenas (such as the
networks associated with particular political parties) or more publicly (conferences, forums, media presentations, etc.) The role of the media (in both its traditional and new forms) in terms of influencing public opinion on policy problems and initiatives is also an important player in the Context of Influence. Unsurprisingly, it can be very difficult to identify who/what is exercising power in the Context of Influence, not only because of its sometimes concealed nature and the multiplicity of policy actors that could possibly be involved, but also as Lawn (2001:180) described it, because networks of influence are ‘constantly shape-shifting’, as different people are involved at different times, or parts of the network are moving at different speeds to other parts. As well as problems of identification, this also creates difficulties in terms of co-ordination for those in the Context of Influence who want to advance certain policy initiatives, and so paradoxically as influence on policy-making becomes more diffuse and web-like, it is accompanied by a professionalisation of policy-making in the form of think-tanks and lobby groups who strive to exert more order on the processes to further their own agendas (cf. Galvin 2009:272).

Policy ideas are ‘seeded’ within the Context of Influence through political processes so that support for them is built up before they are disseminated to a wider audience. ‘Policy speak’ (Gale 2003:54) constrains what is considered legitimate to say in various policy contexts and so certain policy solutions come to be seen as more acceptable than others. Thus, certain policy problems and ideas are in ‘good currency’ (Schön 1971, cited by Galvin 2009:271), at particular times, enjoying high levels of public support. So important is this notion of ‘currency’ that the degree of endorsement associated with particular policies may be more important in determining the priority accorded to them than the actual content of the policies themselves as, for example, Cookson (1994:118) found: ‘In the world of educational policy the winners and the losers were separated not so much by the coherence of their arguments, but by their capacity to influence public perception’. The processes of influence and the reality that there is only room for a certain amount of policy issues to be discussed in public conversation at any one time, explains why some policy concerns are given priority when others are not and, hence, how policy can be used as a political tool. The point corresponds with the idea of ‘regimes of truth’ characteristic of Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis. Although less immediately visible perhaps than the Context of Practice or the Context of Policy Text Production, the Context of Influence is, therefore, of crucial importance at all levels of the policy process.

2.6.3 The analytical frame

Arising from the above understandings of discourse theory and the discursive nature of policy, the analytical frame employed during the research (critical policy discourse analysis) is outlined below. The research questions which focussed the study, and the three levels of educational policy-making to which they were addressed, are also discussed.
2.6.3.1 Critical policy discourse analysis

The notion of ‘policy-as-discourse’ as well as ‘policy-as-text’ demands that policy be explored in a way that recognises its discursive nature. Hence, the application of discourse theory in policy analysis, or as Hyatt (2013) termed it ‘critical policy discourse analysis’, offers many possibilities for research, allowing a move away from a solely textual and product-based understanding of policy, to one that focuses on the process of policy, including production, reification and implementation processes. The use of approaches drawn from Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse policy should allow for the ‘relationships of texts, practices and ideologies to social structures, processes and inter-relationships’ to be seen as ‘modalities of power’ and, therefore, to be systematically investigated (Hyatt 2013:5, citing Fairclough 2003). By helping to reveal how the authors of texts ‘represent and construct the social world, institutions, identities, relationships and how these are shaped and characterised ideologically through relations of power’ (Hyatt 2013:5), critical policy discourse analysis can offer valuable insights into policy. It involves both the contextualisation and deconstruction of policy, and Hyatt (2013: 6-10) suggested a number of analytical lenses through which this might be achieved e.g. an examination of policy drivers, levers, steering, trajectories and warrant for contextualisation purposes, and of modes of legitimation, inter-discursivity, intertextuality, evaluation, presupposition, implication, and lexico-grammatical construction for deconstruction purposes. Notably, however, Hyatt (2013:5) clarified that these were not ‘all-encompassing’ or ‘universal’. Researchers, therefore, have scope to choose the analytical lenses most appropriate to their particular area of study, and so the selection and employment of ‘tools’ of discourse analysis to the policy documents in the present research is discussed in the methodology chapter.

2.6.3.2 The research questions:

The research proceeded in light of the above understanding of discourse theory and policy analysis, within the broad parameters of the potential discourses of parent-teacher relations (i.e. Traditional, Managerial and Democratic) that may be constituted by and constitutive of, parental involvement policies in Irish primary education, as outlined in Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4. Given that policies and practices of parental involvement are not neatly parcelled and separated according to these different sets of understandings, but rather have intertwined, borrowed and sometimes contradictory understandings and constructions in co-existence, the following research questions were deemed useful for further exploring parent-teacher relationships in Irish education:

- Do discourses of parental involvement and teacher professionalism construct parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education?
- What implications do these constructions have for policies and practices of parent-teacher relationships, particularly parent-teacher partnerships, in Irish primary education?
- How can these constructions be challenged and/or supported (as/if applicable) in order to enhance parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish primary education?
It is anticipated that these questions allow for the ‘three dimensions of critique’ identified by Reisigl and Wodak (2009:96) to be fulfilled during the research; namely ‘text/discourse immanent critique’, ‘socio-diagnostic critique’ and ‘future related prospective critique’.

2.6.3.3 Three levels of exploration

It is likely that discourses of parental involvement and teacher professionalism will be accepted or resisted in differing ways across various levels of the Irish primary education system. For instance, an individual parent, the principal of a large school, and a policy actor at national level might be expected to have different perceptions of what is most important with regard to parental involvement or teacher professionalism, arising from their different position, objectives and experiences. The understanding that ‘the adequate investigation of discourse of any kind requires attention to large scale cultural forces, to local contexts of practice, and to the fine details of discursive form and context’ (Bucholtz 2001:166, from Fairclough) also suggests a layered approach to the research. Therefore, to account for the possibility of multiple constructions, as well as to provide a practical structure for the research, it is appropriate to explore the discourses relevant for parental involvement across three levels:

- School level relationships between collective or individual teachers and groups of parents or individual parents
- Systemic and national policy-making, involving parent representatives and policy-makers
- Supra-national processes, involving European or international organisations, that influence educational policy-making at national levels

School level relationships

It is school level relationships between parents and teachers that are most likely to be envisaged when practices of parental involvement are considered and, indeed, the importance of these relationships should not be underestimated, given that they are the raison d’être for most policies relating to parental involvement in schools. School level relationships can be approximately categorised into two types; relationships between individual parents and teachers, and those of a whole-school nature; for instance, involving groups such as Parent Associations.

Individually-based interactions between parents and teachers tend to be associated with the educational involvement of the parents in the education of their own child. As such they relate to the parent’s role as the primary educators of their own children, are likely to be linked to parental notions of responsibility and moral duty and are heavily promoted as a means of combating educational disadvantage. The educational involvement of parents raises questions about the extent of the teacher’s professional domain, may challenge the idea of the ‘good’ teacher being an educational expert, and contests what is valuable knowledge in the classroom setting. The discursive background, experiences and personal constructions of what it is to be a ‘good parent’ or ‘good teacher’ are relevant at this individual level, albeit that the individuals involved may have little conscious awareness of the
influence of discourse on their interactions. However, while the ways in which policy and discourse structure power relations within these individual relationships are important, ultimately individual relationships rest on the interpersonal dynamic between the participants involved. Therefore, it may be difficult to provide general insights on the impact of discourse in constructing these relationships. Although broad parameters for individual parent-teacher interactions may be laid down in relevant policy documents, no policy document could specifically legislate for the myriad of factors that influence and determine individual relationships; hence, parents and teachers have very significant scope for reinterpreting them in their own practice. This demonstrates the importance of ‘the smallest unit’ (McLaughlin 1987:171) in accepting, resisting or altering policy. However, notwithstanding the practice related complexities, identifying and examining the policy intentions and assumptions about relationships between individual parents and teachers in Irish schools should help illuminate how the parent-teacher relationship is constructed in Irish education.

Arguably whole-school level relationships, given their often more visible and deliberate nature, are more susceptible to policy directives and are more overtly constituted by prevailing discourses of parent-teacher relations, than those between individual parents and teachers. Such relationships include parental participation in formal structures such as Boards of Management and Parent Associations, as well as more casual participation, such as in fundraising initiatives or sacramental preparation. Notions of what it is to be a ‘good parent’ or ‘good teacher’ in this sense may vary from that of the classroom-based relationship, as whole-school relationships are less likely to focus on specific children and, therefore, appeal to moral responsibilities in different ways. The value placed on professional knowledge is of relevance, particularly when the involvement does not relate to strictly pedagogical matters. Parental involvement which incorporates shared governance and decision-making in schools has been a recurrent theme in international educational discourse for the past number of decades. Given the importance of decision-making at this level for all members of the school community, issues of power and control are likely to be particularly pertinent. The discursive origins and assumptions of policy relating to these forms of involvement are very important then to the exploration of parent-teacher relationships in Irish education.

**National/systemic policy-making**

Parental involvement and parent-teacher relations at national and systemic level can be examined from two perspectives. Firstly, the direct influence of parents on the policies produced at this level is relevant, and secondly, the actual involvement of parents at national and systemic levels can be regarded as itself being a type of parental involvement.

Although a certain amount of policy text production (at least in theory) with regard to parent-teacher relationships occurs at school level, it is from national and systemic levels in Irish education that the most significant policy documents originate. Even if (to date) the Department of Education have produced few directives or mandates with regard to parent-teacher relations, those comments
found in Department documentation relating to parental involvement are likely to be important, as are policy documents produced by a range of national bodies that address parent-teacher relations (INTO, NPC-P, NCCA, etc.). Such policies all assist in constructing notions of ‘goodness’ in terms of parental involvement and parent-teacher relations. As Simola et al. (1998:72) explained, ‘Committee and curricular texts are serious and authoritative verbal acts of experts who speak as experts and who with their speech form the official truth on teaching……Although they are the products of individuals, they have the appearance of anonymity, of an official truth’. Similarly, Wodak and Meyer (2009:10) noted that ‘texts are often sites of struggle as they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance’. As well as texts directly produced, the influence of the State in ‘policy-steering’ at national levels must be considered (cf. Hyatt 2013:6), that is the possibility the State retains influence over policy changes through the use of ‘policy levers’ to achieve its policy objectives, even though it may not appear to be intervening directly in the policy process. An exploration of the processes of policy-making at national and systemic levels is, therefore, important in terms of examining the discursive construction of parent-teacher relations in Irish education. Indeed, policies produced at national levels in Irish education were a crucial source of data for the research.

While the involvement of parents in educational debate and policy-making at national or school systems levels is not strictly or necessarily a type of parent-teacher relationship, an examination of such involvement may be enlightening for identifying constructions of parental involvement at school and classroom levels. In particular, it may reveal underlying attitudes, perspectives and approaches to notions of parental involvement. The examination of parental involvement at this level allows discourses of parental involvement to be positioned in relation to broader societal discourses, and provides a means to explore issues such as parental co-option, parental voice, financial implications of parental involvement, uses of partnership terminology, and power and control within the Irish education system more generally. These ultimately impact on the relationships at school level and between individual parents and teachers. The influence of parental involvement at national levels is crucial to discourses of parent-teacher relations, as even when parents are not directly involved in writing policy documents they are, nonetheless, likely as a constituency to influence how policy problems are constructed and addressed.

Supra-national processes

Many commentators have argued that traditional approaches to policy-making have been superseded by a new model (cf. Ball 2008; Galvin 2009:272), involving a complex and multi-layered process, where a variety of groups (pressure groups, think tanks, business interests, agencies, private consultants) now influence policy decisions, with varying degrees of success (Earley 1999:149). Ball and Exley (2010:151) described this in terms of ‘a shift away from government towards forms of polycentric governance, where policy is produced through multiple agencies and multiple sites of
discourse generation’. In 1989 Kellaghan (p211) commented on how the authority of individuals in legislative and executive branches of government in Ireland was ‘increasingly constrained by the views of other stakeholders in the system’ and he noted that ‘many more points of view compete for a say in decision-making’ which suggests that the emergence of this ‘new’ policy-making model can be dated to the late 1980s in Ireland. The privatisation of educational policy-making (cf. Lawn 2001; Pinto 2012), the emergence of a European education policy-making space (cf. Grek & Lawn 2009; Lawn & Lingard 2002), greater cross national policy-borrowing (cf. Lingard 2010; Grek, Lawn, Lingard, Ozga, Rinne, Segerholm & Simola 2009; Cerny 2014; Ball & Youdell 2009) and the increasing influence exerted by supra-national organisations (cf. Ball 2003; Grek 2013; Kutay 2014) are features of this ‘new’ policy-making model.

This understanding suggests that the role of the supra-national space in education policy-making is increasingly important, both in terms of the ‘Europeanisation’ of education, and with regard to the roles played by organisations such as the OECD, World Bank, etc. Although the supra-national level does sometimes have a direct role in policy production, it is in terms of indirect influence that its main impact on policy-making can be observed (cf. Grek 2009, 2014, regarding the PISA influence across Europe). Policy concepts spread through policy networks and processes of policy-borrowing, ‘helped’ by formal organisations and structures (cf. Mulgan 2003). While some of these supra-national organisations have directly addressed the issue of parental involvement in schools, even when they do not, the broader policy concepts and memes that they circulate can serve to construct parent-teacher relations at national and school levels in particular ways. Arguably Irish policy-making may have become even more susceptible to external influences as a result of the EU/IMF/ECB economic bailout it received in November 2010 and the subsequent monitoring of Irish economic performance by the ‘troika’ (cf. Lynch, Grummell & Devine 2012:14). Therefore, an examination of the role of supra-national organisations in the spread and promotion of the discourses and assumptions that underlie and influence policies of parental involvement in Irish education is necessary when endeavouring to understand constructions of parent-teacher relations.

Comments on affordances of the three level model

The three levels of individual/school level relationships, national and systemic policy-making and supra-national influence provide a helpful structure for organising the research logically and sensibly. Taking a layered approach to the research acknowledges that policy is ‘a multi-layered phenomenon’ (McLaughlin 2008:177), and that each layer contributes to the overall discourse. The layers chosen accord with Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) notion of the ‘glonacal agency heuristic’, which emphasises the complicated interactions between global, national and local policy levels (glna-cal). The three level approach also suits Fairclough’s (1992:4) understanding of the three levels of analysis necessary in Critical Discourse Analysis; the analysis of the actual text, of the discursive practices and of the larger social context within which the text and discursive practices exist.
Therefore, the three layer approach provides a useful frame through which to advance critical policy discourse analysis.

In order to succinctly explain the research approach and focus of the study, the three levels in which the research questions are to be examined are presented here in an uncomplicated form. However, it is important not to conceptualise too rigidly, given the multitude of differing and fluctuating contexts that exist within each level. While this is true of all discourse work, in light of the ‘highly heterogeneous and contradictory’ nature (Spencer 2001:15) of discourse, it is likely to be particularly applicable to educational discourses, given Mulgan’s (2003) inclusion of education among those policy fields that are in flux. The analysis must always be tentative and insecure, therefore. Nevertheless, as it is difficult to envisage any frame that could adequately account for such differences and since discourse analysis by its very nature must be always interpretative and open to change, these concerns do not negate the potential usefulness of the frame.

2.6.4 Conclusion to theoretical frame

In summary, the research questions are to be explored through a layered process of critical policy discourse analysis (Hyatt 2013) drawing on Foucauldian discourse theory, examining the discursive construction of parent-teacher relations and the implications for policies and practices of parental involvement, at three levels relevant to the Irish education system.

2.7 Chapter summary

Having reviewed the existing literature of parental involvement/parent-teacher relations and clarified relevant concepts, the research proceeds on the understanding that discursive models of what a ‘good parent’ or ‘good teacher’ is, or does, are likely to affect interactions between parents and teachers, rather than just reflecting what is happening in practice, and these discursive models may provide insights into the social, political and ideological assumptions that underpin parent-teacher relations in particular contexts (Nakagawa 2000). The theoretical framework of the research requires that Irish educational policies and discourses be examined to identify their assumptions and implications, their origins and transmission, and what they achieve in relation to parental involvement and parent-teacher relations in Irish schools. Such discourse sources involve in the first instance Department of Education policies relating to parental involvement, as that is the determiner of Irish education policy, but also policies, opinions, and statements from other influential bodies in Irish education, such as parent and teacher associations, political parties, business interests, European and international organisations, etc. Methodological considerations arising from this examination of discourse are outlined in the following chapter.
3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction to chapter

This chapter outlines the major methodological considerations that informed the discourse theory approach taken in this study. Attention is given initially to how the research was conceptualised and approached and to how this led to discourse analysis, specifically a Foucauldian-informed discourse analytic, being chosen as potentially the best way to explore the research questions. The principal methods used in the discourse analysis approach (namely documentary discourse analysis and elite interviewing) are then defined and discussed in terms of their advantages and disadvantages as data collection methods, the challenges presented by their practical application, and the ethical concerns associated with them. The chapter concludes with an outline of the chronology of the research undertaken.

3.2 Emergence of the research methodology

A social constructivist understanding of the world allows for the foregrounding of the discursive elements of parent-teacher relations. Qualitative research approaches tend to be most compatible with constructionist worldviews (inter alia Creswell 2009: 8). Within the broad context of social constructivism and qualitative research approaches, the exploration of the potential association between discourses of teacher professionalism and parent-teacher relations, and the implications thereof, could have taken many forms. Therefore, a range of potential framing methodologies were considered in the early stages of the research. Most notably, a consideration of the possibilities and strengths of Action Research and Case Study methodologies influenced the emergence of the final research design; that being critical discourse analysis, where the case comprises the changing relations of schools, parents and teachers in contemporary Ireland.

3.2.1 Action research

Initially an Action Research approach based on critical theory was contemplated (cf. Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:302-304). It was envisaged that this would involve making a deliberate attempt to change the practices and perceptions of a primary school community with regard to parental involvement and parent-teacher relations, with the intention of creating parent-teacher partnerships in a context of democratic teacher professionalism. The idea of making a personal attempt to ‘understand, improve and reform practice’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:297) was very attractive to the researcher, as was the opportunity to make an association between her ‘teaching’ and ‘researching’ lives. The participatory, emancipatory and democratic objectives of Action Research are in accordance with those of parent-teacher partnership itself. The inclusion of critical tenets in the research approach was also appealing, as this would guard against the danger of merely re-researching the influential factors regarding parental involvement that are so frequently mentioned in the literature.
However, a closer consideration of this research approach revealed a number of difficulties, not least among them the degree to which participants should or could be involved in the research process (Fraenkel & Wallen 2008: 593). Although much of the literature emphasises collaboration as a characteristic feature of Action Research (cf. Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:299 citing Hult & Lennung 1980, McKernan 1991, Winter 1996, Kemmis & McTaggart 1992), some commentators envisage it in individualistic terms (cf. Cohen Manion & Morrison 2007:301 citing Stenhouse 1974, Whitehead 1985). Individualistic action research, however, seems more in accordance with what Fraenkel and Wallen (2008:590) term ‘practical Action Research’ than that influenced by critical theory. Regardless of this differentiation, some degree of inclusion of the perspectives and experiences of others is necessary to support Action Research and to lessen the risk of it being unduly subjective and confessional. The fostering of parent-teacher partnerships is not a task that a single individual will be likely to have much success with, given the reciprocal requirement of partnership and the necessity that all participants genuinely commit to it. Accordingly, an atmosphere of partnership cannot be effectively nurtured in a school by just one teacher, no matter how enthusiastic she might be. This realisation resulted in the decision not to use Action Research in this study, given the significant difficulties for the researcher in guaranteeing that the ‘small scale interventions’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2004:297) required could be successfully implemented at whole-school level, so allowing the reflective elements of the research to proceed.

Nonetheless, the consideration of Action Research did contribute to the study, in that its implementation would have required an in-depth and detailed reflection on how discourses of teacher professionalism affect individual parent-teacher interactions, and how such discourses circulate and are accepted or resisted in various contexts. In considering how such research might proceed, therefore, the researcher’s attention was drawn to the importance of discourse in influencing the interaction of parents and teachers. It became apparent that the role of policy and the discursive construction of practice was itself an aspect of parent-teacher relations in need of greater exploration. The recognition that the tendency of Action Research to focus on practice rather than policy would be a weakness in the intended study revealed the importance of accounting for discourse operating from/at national, European and supra-national levels, as well as those operating at individual and school levels. As the importance of discourse in constructing parent-teacher relations became more apparent, and increasingly of interest to the research, Action Research receded as a potentially useful framing methodology for the evolving study.

3.2.2 Case study

The appropriateness of Case Study approach for the research was also considered. Stake’s (1994, cited by Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:255) concept of ‘collective case studies’ was initially of particular interest. It seemed feasible to select a sample of schools that had different approaches to, and experiences of parental involvement, and use these to examine the influence of
different constructions of teacher professionalism on parent-teacher relations. In common with Action Research, Case Study would allow for the collection of in-depth, rich data, thereby providing a detailed explanation of the processes affecting parental involvement in the chosen schools. The wholeness of the information gathered through Case Study would permit a nuanced understanding of the complete context in which parent-teacher relations occur in schools to be achieved (cf. Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007: 253). Simons (2009:13) described how Case Study research emerged in the 1960s and 1970s from a need, among others, to include attention to the dynamics of implementation and interpretation of events in their socio-political contexts in educational research, a requirement pertaining also to the policy discourse focus of the present research. Case Studies tend to be easy to read and interesting for readers to understand which is an often overlooked but, nonetheless, important consideration in research (cf. Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:253).

However, as for the Action Research proposal, while Case Study might be useful for exploring influential discourses at individual and whole-school levels, it was difficult to envisage how in its traditional form the school-based nature of Case Study research would allow for an adequate exploration of national, European and supra-national influences. Based on an initial understanding of the school as the ‘case’, the research would seem likely to focus on practices of parental involvement in schools. This might well occur at the expense of an examination of policy and policy-making at levels beyond the school, despite the latter being the more problematic and less researched element of the study. Fraenkel and Wallen’s (2008:431) comments on the extensive resources and time required to conduct multiple case studies were also dissuading factors for this approach.

Nevertheless, an understanding that the ‘case’ can be conceptualised narrowly or broadly depending on the needs of the study raised the possibility of incorporating some of the benefits of Case Study research into the study, without sacrificing the interest in discourses and policy-making at national and supra-national as well as school levels. Fraenkel and Wallen (2008:430) explained that the ‘case’ in Case Study research does not always have to be ‘an individual or situation that can easily be identified’, but rather that ‘it may be an event, an activity, or an on-going process’. Thus, it is possible to treat parent-teacher relations in Irish education as the ‘case’ through which to explore the location and influence of traditional, managerial and democratic discourses of teacher professionalism in Irish primary education.

Simons’ (2009:7) advice that there is no right way to do Case Study research supported the possibility of taking a somewhat unconventional approach in terms both of the choice of case and the use of critical policy discourse analysis as the lens through which to explore that case. Her definition of Case Study (p 21) supports the consideration of the present research in terms of a Case Study:

‘Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a ‘real life’ context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic, programme,
policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action.’

According to Simons (2009:167) the strength of Case Study lies in the in-depth exploration of the particular, and she noted the paradox that it is through the exploration of a particular case in depth that we can come to understand the universal, although it is not possible to generalise from Case Studies as understood by positivist research traditions. (Simons made no reference to Bassey’s 1999 concept of ‘fuzzy generalization’ despite it appearing relevant to her stance). This justifies the exploration of discourses in Irish primary education through a focus on parent-teacher relations, as the greater depth that is achievable by focussing on one particular education policy aspect may be more insightful than would an exploration of all educational policy-making, given that the latter by practical necessity would involve a more shallow form of research.

3.2.3 Discourse theory

Consideration of the fit to intention of Action Research and Case Study as research approaches for the intended study confirmed that in their traditional forms they did not fully facilitate a satisfactory account of the policy aspects of parent-teacher relations. As the policy aspects of parent-teacher relations have been less studied than the practice ones, and given the importance of policy and discourse that was apparent from the consideration of how Action Research might proceed, this appeared to be a crucial omission. Having decided to focus on the policy aspects of parent-teacher relations, and having refined the research questions accordingly, it became evident that the study was approaching the ‘case’ of parent-teacher relations from a discourse theory perspective and that some form of discourse analysis would, therefore, be the most appropriate choice of methodology. The complicated nature of discourse analysis ensured that many further research options then had to be explored, as the next section elaborates.

3.3 Discourse analysis

Section 2.6 outlines the Foucauldian concept of discourse theory that underpins the approach taken to discourse analysis in the present study. Hence, the discussion of discourse analysis in this chapter addresses the contentious place of discourse analysis in conventional understandings of the research process, the complex nature of the field of discourse analysis, the design of the discourse analysis undertaken, and the operationalisation of that design. Caveats and ethical concerns relating to discourse analysis are discussed, as are its key affordances.

3.3.1 Discourse analysis – mind-set or tool-kit?

There is much debate in the literature about where discourse analysis fits in conventional understandings of the research process. Hammersley (2003) devoted a paper to considering whether discourse analysis and conversational analysis should be treated as methods (‘to be used by social
scientists when appropriate for the problem being investigated, perhaps in combination with other methods’), or as paradigms (‘exclusive and self-sufficient approaches to investigating the social world’). He concluded that they are more research methods than self-sufficient paradigms. This view did not go uncontested, however (cf. Potter 2003, who argued that discourse analysis was neither a self-contained paradigm nor a stand-alone method). Jóhannesson (2010:251) contended that discourse analysis (specifically historical discourse analysis) ‘is an approach to research, rather than a method in itself’, although he admitted (p262) that to some extent it is a research method as well. Van Dijk (2009:62) commented on the ‘widespread misconception’ that a critical approach is a method of discourse analysis, arguing that what he called ‘CDS’ (Critical Discourse Studies) ‘is not a method, but rather a critical perspective, position or attitude within the discipline of multidisciplinary Discourse Studies’. Given these contradictions in the work of leading scholars, the present research was undertaken with the understanding that discourse analysis can be regarded both as research mindset and research tool-set. Such a view follows that of Stevenson (2004:26) who noted ‘the fusion of theoretical/methodological positions within DA [discourse analysis]’.

Further to the point about the difficulty of placing discourse analysis within traditional research frames, is Potter’s (2003:784) point that the category ‘discourse analysis’ is itself both a ‘boon and an encumbrance’. While it allows for the enclosing and organisation of various kinds of research within a particular research field, it also gives the impression that there is discursive and non-discursive research. However, if one accepts the all-encompassing and constructive nature of discourse (as Foucauldian approaches to discourse do) then it is impossible to envisage research taking place outside of a discursive context. Rather than having discourse analysis and non-discourse analysis, Potter argued (p792) that ‘there is analysis that is highlighting and attending to the role of that discourse and analysis which is ignoring it’. By implication all social research should have a discourse analysis element. While the complicated consequences of this line of argument are outside of the scope of the present study, it indicates the problematic nature of attempting to classify discourse analysis through conventional means.

Since differentiating terminology to describe the various facets of discourse analysis is helpful, in this study the research approach is termed ‘discourse theory’ and the methodology ‘discourse analysis’, with the tools of documentary discourse analysis and elite interviewing forming the research instruments. Notably, however, a consistent differentiating of these terms was not found in the literature reviewed.

3.3.2 The field of discourse analysis

The field of discourse analysis encompasses a range of different research traditions and accordingly the terminology and language applied to discourse research is often poorly defined and contradictory, while issues of methodological clarity are also pertinent. The complex nature of the field is considered below.
3.3.2.1 Variety of traditions of discourse analysis

Discourse analysis can be defined in simple form as ‘the study of language in use’ or more broadly as ‘the study of human meaning-making’ (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates 2001b:3). Given the expanse of research possibilities that fall within the scope of these definitions, it is little wonder that many different approaches have been taken to discourse analysis. Therefore, it must be considered in terms of a ‘field of research’ (Taylor 2001:5), characterised by ‘methodological and theoretical eclecticism’ (Bucholtz 2001:175), rather than a single practice. As noted in Section 2.6.1.1 various attempts have been made to classify approaches to discourse analysis in order to help explain the field. For example, Rogers et al. (2005:369) provided a list of ten subsections of discourse analysis; speech act theory, genre theory, intertextuality, discursive formations, conversation analysis, narrative analysis, discursive psychology, ethnography of communication, multi-modal analysis and critical discourse analysis. Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001a:ii) discussed discourse analysis in terms of ‘five core traditions in discourse research; conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, discursive psychology, critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian analysis’, although they admitted that these categories ‘by no means exhaust the many kinds of discourse research in which social scientists are engaged’. While useful, such a system is problematic in that it appears to separate Foucauldian influences from critical discourse analysis, despite critical discourse theorists generally being heavily influenced by Foucault. Indeed, ‘Foucauldian Critical Discourse Analysis’ (Jäger & Maier 2009) is itself an approach to discourse study, albeit the Foucauldian aspect is disputed (cf. inter alia Graham 2005). Wodak and Meyer (2009:2, citing Van Dijk 2007) listed ‘the new fields/paradigms/linguistic sub-disciplines of semiotics, pragmatics, psycho- and sociolinguistics, ethnography of speaking, conversation analysis and discourse studies’ as influencing the emergence of discourse studies in the 1960s and 1970s. Arising from this they (2009:20) identified six potential research strategies of critical discourse analysis; Discourse Historical Approach, Corpus-Linguistics Approach, Social Actors Approach, Dispositive Analysis, Sociocognitive Approach and Dialectical-Relational Approach, but noted (p33) that this list was not comprehensive. Somewhat similarly, Barker and Rossi (2011) discussed post-structural DA, Foucauldian, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, as well as critical DA approaches to research. They were enthusiastic that the variety within discourse analysis is a ‘healthy sign of theoretical diversity’ (p 142).

Notwithstanding the advantages of diversity, such a variety of approaches poses challenges for those trying to achieve a comprehensive overview of the field. Perhaps it is more useful to distinguish between two major approaches to discourse analysis – descriptive and critical analysis (cf. Johnstone 2002:28; Teo 2000:12). Descriptive approaches are primarily interested in describing how language works in order to understand it, whereas critical approaches go beyond that, to explain ‘how and why discourse is produced the way it is’ (Moore 2002:498) and may (especially CDA versions) involve an intervention in the world described (Gee 2011a:9). While this differentiation has the advantage of simplicity and clarity, matters are complicated somewhat by Gee’s contention that all discourse
analysis has to be critical, because language is always political, always concerned with social goods. Arguably therefore, discourse analysis needs to be considered in the form of a continuum from descriptive to critical approaches, along which many different versions of discourse analysis can be placed. Indeed, Hammersley (1997:237) made reference to the spectrum of discourse analysis. This notion of a ‘spectrum’ proved particularly useful for the present research, by allowing a critical approach to discourse analysis that did not fully encompass all the characteristics of Fairclough style Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

3.3.2.2 Contradictory definitions and terminology

As well as the multitude of approaches contained within the descriptor ‘discourse analysis’, their intersecting nature, and the variety of underlying influences, a further complication in explaining the field arises from the confusing and sometimes contradictory employment of language. This results in what can be perceived as ‘an esoteric activity couched in elusive and arcane terminology’ (Luke 1995:11). Different meanings are applied to similar terms depending on the research tradition (Barker & Rossi 2011:142) and the researcher by whom they are being used. Wodak and Meyer (2009:5) noted the ‘manifold’ definitions of terms such as ‘discourse’, ‘critical’, ‘ideology’, and the criticism and misunderstandings that arise as a result (p3). For example, the use of capitalisation (CDA) to distinguish the work of Fairclough (and others in the CDA network) from other critical approaches to discourse analysis is particularly awkward and unclear. The capitalisation is not always used consistently in the literature as, for instance, in Fairclough (2009) where only the abbreviation is capitalised, and lower case used when ‘critical discourse analysis’ is spelled out fully. This confusion is further demonstrated in the account provided by Rogers et al. (2005:380) of researchers erroneously describing their research as CDA. Gee’s explicit denial that he uses CDA being contradicted by others who do regard him as part of the CDA network is noteworthy (cf. Rogers et al. 2005:377). Given these inconsistencies, it seems more effective to reference the work of various influential scholars in describing different approaches to discourse analysis, as some researchers have come to be closely associated with particular versions of discourse analysis, (e.g. Fairclough with Critical Discourse Analysis, Gee with critical discourse analysis and Kress with multimodal semiotics, Collins 2011:xiii), than trying to compile a comprehensive list of ‘brands of analyses’ (Rogers et al. 2005:367).

Furthermore, since approaches to discourse analysis are in a constant state of flux, (cf. Kress interviewed by Rogers 2004c:20), given the fragmented nature of the research field (cf. Rogers 2004b:21; Wodak & Meyer 2009:21), and since there is much disagreement among researchers and theorists in the field (cf. Billig 2008; Milliken 1999; Wodak & Meyer 2009; West 2003), it is unnecessary for the purposes of this study to devote much energy to attempting to delineate boundaries or label approaches. Indeed, a number of commentators have drawn attention to the difficulties of trying to do this (cf. Fairclough interviewed by Rogers 2004b:7; Rogers 2011: xvii). Bucholtz (2001:175) remarked on how few researchers were ‘card-carrying’ members of a particular
approach, rather many ‘make use of these frameworks without subscribing wholeheartedly to their entire doctrine’. An examination of the influences and assumptions of a particular approach to discourse is, therefore, more likely to be of value than endeavouring to name it definitively.

Hence, while the approach to discourse analysis of the present research relies heavily on Foucault’s understanding of discourse, and accordingly can be located within the broad school of Critical Discourse Analysis, it was not constrained by a perceived requirement to wholly embrace the ‘entire doctrine’ of CDA, nor to confine its influences to those researchers who are undisputed proponents of CDA. It is therefore better described as ‘critical discourse analysis’ using lower case letters, rather than ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ using upper case letters. The combination of various tools and methods in the research, the consideration of interdiscursive and intertextual relationships, the interest in the practical application of results of analyses, the recognition of constant instability within categories and tools, the use of parental involvement as a detailed ‘case’ through which to explore discursive construction, and the concern with transparency about the researcher’s own position, mean that the approach used in this study could alternatively be described as in accordance with Reisigl and Wodak’s (2009) ‘Discourse Historical Approach’ /DHA.

3.3.2.3 Issues relating to methodological clarity

The field of discourse analysis is characterised by plurality and lack of consensus. Even apparently delineated subsections of the broader field such as that of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have been described as ‘a set of creative potentials for working with, not a fixed method’ (Threadgold 2003:31; also Fairclough interviewed by Rogers 2004b:25). Baker, Gabrielatos, Kosravinik, Krzysanowski, McEnerny and Wodak (2008:273) described CDA as an ‘academic movement’ which adopts any method adequate to realise the aims of the specific research project. For some commentators, this is a reason for complaint, (Potter 2003:787 saw methodological eclecticism as generating ‘muddle’) as they perceive discourse analysis to be undermined by its lack of standardised procedures when compared to longer established research methodologies. There have been calls for discourse analysis procedures to be applied more systematically and more rigorously (cf. Rogers et al. 2005:379, citing Verschueren 2001, Martin 2000). The difficulty in formulating a set of evaluative criteria for discourse analysis work was of concern to some theorists (cf. Wetherell 1998).

Interestingly, however, and very much from a discourse analysis perspective, Jóhannesson (2010:259) commented on how the major discursive themes such as ‘validity, reliability, methods of sampling and transferability’ serve as legitimating principles of the discourse around research, with the collection of ‘neutral but useful scientific knowledge’ the expected outcome. By extension then, discourse analysis in conceptualising these concerns differently provides an opportunity to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, even about the nature of research itself. This is not to argue, however, than issues relating to research quality can be omitted from discourse analysis approaches, but rather that they are understood in different ways (cf. Stevenson 2004, citing Potter 1996). The lack of
routinized procedures also means that discourse analysis offers the advantage of flexibility in research design, as both Hammersley (2003) and Erjavec (2004) found that it could be ‘usefully combined with other qualitative and even quantitative approaches’ (Hammersley 2003:772). Somewhat similarly, Rogers et al. (2005:387) noted how the ‘hybrid’ nature of CDA allows it to ‘adapt and respond to ever-changing conditions’. Hybridity, both in interdisciplinary and in methodological terms, is a feature of DHA approaches also (cf. Reisigl & Wodak 2009). It was in the context of these remarks that hybridity was embraced in the critical discourse analysis employed in the present study.

3.3.3 The design of the discourse analysis employed in this study

In light of the complicated nature of the field of discourse theory, the application of discourse analysis in educational research could take many forms. The following section outlines the research design that was employed in this study and which involved a cyclical process of discourse analysis of educational policy documents and data obtained through elite interviewing. Although it draws on the tools and example of Critical Discourse Analysis, the research is located in the commonalities across the field of discourse analysis, rather than seeking to remain faithful to any particular ‘brand’ of analysis. Since the primary concern in developing the research design was to adequately explore the research questions using whatever methods seemed most appropriate, the research is best described in terms of a fusion approach. A two stage approach was taken to the discourse analysis itself; firstly the ‘tools’ of discourse analysis were used to provide an overview analysis of each text, and then a thematic analysis was undertaken to refine the analysis in the context of the research questions.

3.3.3.1 Tool-based discourse analysis

Bearing the above observations about the field of discourse studies in mind, the approach to discourse analysis taken in this study was informed by Gee’s (2011b: ix) contention;

‘Any theory of discourse analysis offers us a set of tools with which to analyse language-in-use. In my view, no one theory is universally right or universally applicable. Each theory offers tools which work better for some kinds of data than they do for others. Furthermore, anyone engaged in their own discourse analysis must adapt the tools they have taken from a given theory to the needs and demands of their own study’.

Gee (2011b: x) defined a ‘tool’ as ‘a specific question to ask of data’. Based on an extensive reading of literature relating to discourse analysis, both of an instructional (inter alia Gee 2011a, 2011b; Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, eds. 2001a, 2001b; Wodak & Meyer eds. 2009; Wodak & Krzyzanowski eds. 2008; Rogers ed. 2011; Hyatt 2010, 2013; Luke 1995; Milliken 1999) and demonstrative nature (inter alia Barker & Rossi 2011; Bhatia 2006; McCloskey 2008; Teo 2000; Fairclough 2000a; Sotillo & Starace-Nastasi 1999) a large number of tools of discourse analysis were identified. All of these tools were initially listed as being potentially helpful for the present study. As the research progressed and the researcher became more familiar with the tools, it became easier to assess their utility. It
became apparent, for instance, due both to the Foucauldian understanding of discourse underpinning the research, and the limited nature of the policy documents available, that the techniques of Corpus Linguistics were unlikely to prove helpful in the present research. These ‘tools’ were then omitted from further consideration, albeit that is not to deny that they could be supportive in other critical discourse analysis research projects (cf. Mautner 2009). Rogers’ (2011:xvi) comment that ‘In reality it is quite usual to see a “hybrid” approach to critical discourse analysis, where the theories and analytic tools brought to bear on the problem cross various traditions and approaches’, justifies this tactic of choosing tools most likely to support the particular research topic.

In some cases researchers used different terms to describe the same tools, some of the tools overlapped each other, or the differences between them were so minimal as to be irrelevant for the purposes of this study. In order, therefore, to apply these tools in a systematic way in the present study, and to avoid unnecessary repetition or omission, the tools were classified according to the aspects of discourse that they questioned. This process was informed by Fairclough’s three dimensional understanding of discourse, whereby texts are read in terms of their language, their processes of production, distribution and consumption, and their relation to broader social structures and power relations (cf. Fairclough 1992:4). Five categories were identified; Content (the subject matter and language of the text), Context (the processes of production and distribution), Interpretation (processes of consumption, attention to reader subjectivity), Power (how power is reflected in and by the text), and Operation (what the text achieves). Within each of these five categories further subdivision was undertaken, resulting in similar tools being grouped together. This allowed for the consistent and comprehensive questioning of each data sample, through the creation of a five part grid template which was employed for each document. It also provided a good reference guide for the researcher. When new tools were found they were slotted into the appropriate part of the grid, and their similarity or difference from other tools (and, consequently, their usefulness) easily evaluated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Production/Distribution/Consumption</th>
<th>Relation to broader social structures and power relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interpretation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Non-verbal message components</em></td>
<td><em>Time &amp; Place</em></td>
<td><em>Situated meanings</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vocabulary</em></td>
<td><em>Author</em></td>
<td><em>‘Fill-in’ tools</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Metaphor</em></td>
<td><em>Audience</em></td>
<td><em>Interpretative repertoire</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Grammar</em></td>
<td><em>Framing context</em></td>
<td><em>Subject positions</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Register</em></td>
<td><em>Discourse</em></td>
<td><em>Making strange tools</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gaps &amp; Silences</em></td>
<td><em>Inter-discursivity</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Information structures</em></td>
<td><em>Intertextuality</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Argumentative devices</em></td>
<td><em>Ontological gerrymandering</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Discursive events</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Synopsis of discourse analysis tool grid. See Appendix A for comprehensive and referenced version.
3.3.3.2 Thematic discourse analysis

The requirement that the details included in the analysis be ‘relevant to the arguments that the analysis is trying to make’ (Gee 2011b: xi) necessitated a second stage in the analytical process, whereby a thematic approach was used to focus the above described analysis on discourses of parental involvement and parent-teacher relations. This also allowed the very detailed accounts produced during the tool-based analysis to be reduced to more pertinent and manageable lengths. Such a thematic approach was influenced by the work of others such as, for instance, Bhatia (2006) who used a thematic approach to the analysis of political press conferences. For the purposes of this study three aspects of parent-teacher relations (Justification for parental involvement, Power relations, Implementation of parental involvement) were chosen as focal points around which the broader analysis arising from the grid templates was applied. The narrowing of the focus of the analysis on specific aspects of parent-teacher relations allowed the research questions to be imposed on the data, in keeping with the strategy adopted by Ryan and Johnson (2009:249). This allowed for the location of traditional, managerial and democratic discourses in the policy documents analysed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justification for parental involvement</th>
<th>Power relations (Knowledge)</th>
<th>Implementation of parental involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Features of a traditional understanding of parent-teacher relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of a managerial understanding of parent-teacher relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of a democratic understanding of parent-teacher relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Outline of thematic analysis grid.

Thematic approaches to discourse analysis have been critiqued as an under-utilisation of the resources offered by discourse analysis (cf. Fairclough interviewed by Rogers 2004b:14), or as being too poorly tied to analysis of language (cf. Gee interviewed by Rogers 2004a:21). Care is needed to avoid merely summarising or restating the data, which, while adding nothing to it, can result in the ‘detail and discursive subtlety of the original text’ being lost (Stevenson 2004:25). With regard to the present study, the initial process of employing the tools of discourse analysis to look at all aspects of the text allowed for an adequately ‘fine-grained’ scrutiny (Barker & Rossi 2011:139). Admittedly the move from the first to the second stage of analysis results in a reduced focus on the linguistic elements of the text, but since the purpose of the study was to examine discourses of parent-teacher relations, rather than language use in policy texts per se, this was not deemed a major disadvantage. In any event it is difficult to see how the research questions could be explored without a sharp focus on the themes of parent-teacher relations.

3.3.4 Operationalisation of the design

Having decided on the above process through which to discursively analyse policy documents relating to parent-teacher relations in Irish education, the initial stage of the operationalisation of the
research design involved the careful selection of the most relevant documents. A circular and repetitive process of tool-based and thematic discourse analysis could then proceed.

3.3.4.1 Sampling of documents

The selection of documents to discursively analyse presented both challenges and opportunities, due to the requirement that a sampling strategy be devised to reduce the potentially huge document sample to a manageable size, and in determining the documents most relevant to the exploration of the research questions.

Unlike in quantitative or other qualitative approaches, there are no definitively established procedures for sample selection when using discourse analysis. Each researcher must, therefore, make decisions as to what is most suitable for the particular study in question. ‘What counts as data will depend on the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, about discourse and also about the broad topic of the research’ (Taylor 2001: 24). While this offers flexibility to researchers, it also poses challenges; indeed, Taylor admitted that her own advice about sample selection raised ‘many problems without offering firm solutions’. Most discourse analysts are faced with vast quantities of potential data, what Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter (2000:36) described as the ‘universe of possible texts’, and the first step for the researcher is to identify this material. Since not all of it will contain useful revelations, some process to reduce the identified material to more manageable and relevant quantities is required (cf. Taylor 2001:24; Mautner 2009:130; 2008:35; Titscher et al. 2000). Kress (interviewed by Rogers, 2004c:19/20), when describing working with large amounts of potential data stated: ‘You look at the stuff and look at the stuff and look at the stuff and then you say, this seems really interesting to me, and then you focus on it’. He justified this process as being a ‘systematicness of a quite different kind’. Thomson, Hall and Jones (2010:640) justified their use of a very local and defined data sample by arguing that the intent of critical discourse analysis is ‘to apply to a single or small set of like texts, an analytic approach which reveals much larger patterns of social, political and cultural power relations’. While they admitted ‘the dangers of pushing a single instance too far’, their approach acknowledges the potential of relatively small data sets, providing that they are carefully selected.

The policy documents selected for analysis

For the purposes of the present study, the ‘universe of possible texts’ included all traceable documents influential on Irish primary education that mentioned parents or teachers. Given the specific interest of the research in exploring parent-teacher relations, taking a random sample of these documents was unlikely to be satisfactory and so was disregarded as a possibility. Rather it seemed both logical and practicable to focus on identifying and sourcing the full range of documents which addressed parental involvement/parent-teacher relations specifically and/or at length, or documents published by organisations with a particular interest in parental involvement and parent-teacher relations. Source and topic, therefore, became the criteria used to select documents, with documents chosen because they were highly specific, rather than being broadly representative, in line with
practice in this area (cf. Taylor 2001:25). The sampling process paid specific attention to denoting policy produced in and for the Irish setting as well as supra-national policy work on parents and parental-involvement produced elsewhere, as the latter was recognised as an important source for many of the ideas and positions surfacing in the Irish produced materials (cf. Galvin 2009).

Initially, the document sample was confined to policy documents published since the 1998 Education Act. However, certain aspects of relevant policy conversations were in time noted to have concluded ahead of the Education Act. This resulted in an absence of more recent publications in some areas. Therefore exceptions had to be made to the post-1998 line in order to accommodate important dimensions of the discourse and practice, particularly in the case of Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) and Parents as Partners in Education, Circular 24/91 (DES), as noted below.

The actual mechanics of document selection were challenging and gave rise to considerable visioning and re-visioning of the search strategy. Various approaches were taken. These were guided primarily by library system support but also reflected growing individual understandings of likely sources. The search process included deep searches constructed in consultation with librarians at UCD using catalogue and web-trawling, systematically searching through the websites of influential organisations identified as influential as the work and reading progressed, consultation with policy insiders at Irish and EU level, discussions with others who have researched parental involvement in Irish education, examining the bibliographies of related publications, as well as physical searches at the storage facility in the researcher’s own school where hard-copies of all policy documents received by the school over the past thirty years are stored. The full range of documents selected for analysis are listed in Appendix C.

Of the documents produced within Ireland, the INTO’s 1997 publication Parental Involvement: Possibilities for Partnership and the NCCA’s 2009 publication Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners most clearly address the issues with which the research was concerned. Therefore, despite being published prior to 1998, Possibilities for Partnership was deemed too important to omit, especially as the INTO has not addressed the topic at such length since. Issues of interest to the research were also addressed by Supporting Each Other: A Guide to Best Practice for Effective Partnership between Principals and Parent Associations (NPC-P/IPPN 2010) and the parent involvement chapter of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011). Educate Together’s charter ‘Mission, Vision and Values’ (2004) and the NPC-P’s education policy position Education for Tomorrow, The Parent’s Vision (2010) provided useful insights into the perspectives and interests of those parent associated groups. Parents as Partners in Education, DES Circular 24/91 (1991) has not been superseded, and given its significance in delineating a partnership approach to parents, must still to be regarded as a contemporary policy document, and so was included in the sample. Similarly, in light of its profound influences on everyday Primary School Curriculum practices in Irish schools, the Primary School Curriculum; Introduction (1999) was also included,
with its limited reference to parents or parental involvement being deemed, of itself, significant.

Finally, in light of the steering and often determining role of the DES in Irish educational policy, the DES *Statement of Strategy 2011-2014/Programme for Government* was included in the sample despite it making few direct references to parental involvement.

Together these documents represent the most comprehensive data-set currently available in the public domain relating to policy and policy action on parents and/or parental involvement in Irish primary school setting with one caveat. A small number of documents written about parental involvement in Irish were regrettably but necessarily excluded from the sample-set as the possibility of *post hoc* translation presented too high a risk in terms of adversely diluting key discursive features of the original text, and the researcher was not confident of her ability to satisfactorily apply the sophisticated tools of discourse analysis to Irish language documents. The exclusion of these documents does not deny that the Gaelscoil movement has involved a considerable demonstration and mobilisation of parent participation in Irish primary education over the past forty years. Aside from this caveat, the above-mentioned set of policy and policy action documents assembled satisfied the challenge of assembling a purposive, robust, and comprehensive document sample that comprised all major policy texts produced in Ireland, in the English language, addressing parental involvement/parent-teacher relations in primary education, and influential at the time of the study. These went forward as the Ireland-specific discourse sources for analysis in relation to the present thesis.

A similar systematic process and decision-pattern helped identify and locate an interesting and useful set of policy documents and papers with more international provenance and reach. This produced the additional sources and materials discussed below.

One anchor document emerged quickly from early searches and discussions; the EPA document *Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Education* (2008) addresses parental involvement in schooling specifically. Apart from this document, however, locating policy texts produced at European level that address parental involvement/parent-teacher relations specifically and at length proved problematic, possibly due to education still sitting uneasily as an EU *area of competence* until very recently. This resulted in, at best, a patchy history of significant public policy text activity in the space.

An extensive search, incorporating databases such as the Westlaw UK archive, the ESO *Information Guide: Education Policy*, and using a variety of relevant keywords to search within *www.europa.eu* returned only four documents that were (or had sections) suited to the purposes of the research: *Council Conclusions of 20 December 1996 on School Effectiveness* (Council of the European Union), *European Report on the Quality of School Education: Sixteen Quality Indicators* (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture 2000), *Commission Staff Working Paper,*

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1 For instance, some documents produced by An Foras Pátrúnacha and Gaelscoileanna Teo for the Gaelscoileanna movement were excluded.
Schools for the 21st Century (Commission of the European Communities 2007) and Involve Parents, Improve Schools (Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency 2009). The European policy setting proved surprisingly silent in terms of public text in this space over the arc of interest to the current research activity. However, after seeing details of the searches, a senior UCD librarian confirmed that an exhaustive search had been conducted. Nevertheless, what little was found at European level meshed well with the Irish materials and proved valuable in time. As discussed in Section 6.3.2, it seems probable that the influence of Europe on parental involvement policy in Irish education may relate more to parental involvement as a policy lever than a policy objective, hence explaining the absence of a direct consideration of parental involvement in European policy texts.

The other inescapable supra-national presences in policy-making are the OECD and World Bank. In light of the widely acknowledged influence of OECD on education policy internationally, particularly through the effect of PISA assessments (cf. inter alia Grek 2009), Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies (OECD 2012) was an obvious document to include from the supra-national sphere. Given the increasingly overt economic focus of Irish policy-making, particularly since the economic bailout of November 2010, an educational policy text from The World Bank was reckoned to be important. Although How can we Make Schools Work Better? (World Bank 2012) takes the form of a case study from Indonesia, it is clearly intended to be a more widely generalizable document, and its contention that increasing parental involvement in schools raises educational standards meant that it was highly pertinent to the topic of the research.

Hence, the documentary discourse analysis reported in the thesis proceeded based on this rich and comprehensive document set, drawn from Irish, European and supra-national sources. The specifics of the analysis are detailed in the following section.

3.3.4.2 Discourse analysis process

The documentary discourse analysis involved initially reading each of the documents and interview texts as an ordinary reader might, and then re-reading it critically a number of times, working from whole text level to word level, as recommended by Huckin (1997:81). In practical terms this involved the employment of the five-part tool grid (see Appendix A), through the creation of a recording template for each text with the tools listed on the left side of the page and blank boxes left on the right (see Appendix B for sample). As the researcher read each document she used the tools of discourse within each of the five categories to question the text, beginning with Context, then Context, then Interpretation, then Power and finally Operation, as outlined in Section 3.3.3.1. Although the process generally followed this trajectory, the consideration of the five categories did not occur in discrete stages, and there were frequent revisions and amendments made to the earlier stages as the analysis progressed. The handwritten notes that were initially jotted in the blank boxes were later organised using word-processing software into more coherent and legible accounts. Although many of the aspects of discourse noted as a result of this process were not directly relevant to the research
questions of the present study, the thorough approach allowed an exploration of how the documents sought to position the author and the audience, and how ‘dominant cultural maps’ and ‘hegemonic assumptions’ (Ryan & Johnson 2009:250) were legitimised through them. It also permitted a systematic and consistent approach to be taken to each text.

As the discourse analysis progressed, certain patterns and aspect of discourse began to emerge as being of particular relevance to the research questions, and it became apparent, as Taylor (2001:39) noted, that certain avenues of exploration would be most important to follow, at the expense of others. Therefore, the accounts produced from the employment of the tools of discourse analysis were then refined in the context of themes of: Justification for parental involvement, Power relations, and Implementation of parental involvement, as outlined in Section 3.3.3.2. These broad themes allowed the discursive construction of parent-teacher relations to be explored further in an effective manner. This refinement allowed for the production of more succinct and relevant accounts, and provided for the tentative identification of discourses and discourse strands across the various documents analysed. It is these thematic accounts of each text that form the basis of Chapter 4.

A circular and repetitive process of analysis was employed, in that each document analysed widened the framing context through which the other documents were viewed. This necessitated a constant re-reading of documents already analysed. It permitted policies to be analysed across the discursive plane as well as for themselves, and allowed for a greater exploration of inter-discursivity and inter-textuality. These comparative and parallel analyses were also helpful in assisting the critical reading of the gaps and silences with regard to parent-teacher relations that were found in particular documents.

The documentary analysis supported the elite interview process, as it was from the documents that conversation topics for the elite interviews were drawn. The interview transcripts were themselves subjected to the two-part process of discourse analysis (albeit with due regard for the differences between formally published policy documents and oral speech), as well as being comparatively analysed in the context of the associated policy document (where relevant). With regard to the framing context problem (Gee 2011b), the completion of the interviews necessitated a return to the documentary analysis and so the cyclical process of reading, analysis, re-reading and re-analysis continued.

Arguably, the employment of coding or concordance software may have reduced the time spent on the analysis of the texts and assisted with the organisation of the findings. However, while the use of software tools was considered in the early stages of the analysis, ultimately it was rejected, mainly because of the risk that software programmes decontextualize and reduce data, thereby impinging on, as Mautner (2009:141) describes, ‘the full textual integrity of the original’. Had the research involved a larger documentary sample, then it may well have been necessary to use software tools to analysis the Content aspects of that sample, but it is difficult to see how software would adequately address the Context, Interpretation, Power and Operation aspects referred to above. For
instance, Mautner (2001:141), a proponent of Corpus Linguistic approaches, noted how ‘larger scale discursive phenomena’ such as argumentative strategies, may only be captured by software tools in certain circumstances. Furthermore, as Mautner (2001:140) reminds researchers, software tools do not remove issues of researcher reflexivity and subjectivity, despite their apparent neutrality. Therefore, given that it was feasible in this study to hand-analyse the data, it seemed best to do so. The utility of this approach can be identified, for example, in Section 4.2.1.2, which reveals how the ostensibly pro-partnership arguments of Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) may in fact be underpinned by traditional approaches to parents and teachers, as it is difficult to imagine how the nuanced and subtle elements of this position could be explored without a high degree of human interaction with the text. While the hand-analysis described in this section was undoubtedly a painstaking and time-consuming process, it forced the researcher to deeply engage with and reflect upon the texts and discourses over a long period of time, which ultimately enhanced the research outcomes.

3.3.5 Caveats/concerns/ethical issues regarding discourse analysis

In common with all research methodologies, discourse analysis has weaknesses and areas of concern, and CDA versions in particular have been subject to criticism. The above described design is not immune to such caveats. The limitations of using ‘language’ to explore ‘language use’ raises particular problems, as does the presence of political agendas and the role of researcher positionality and subjectivity in influencing the research, while the time-consuming and circular nature of discourse analysis is also a concern. The use of policy documents as a primary data source can be problematic as well.

3.3.5.1 Limitations of language

Among the challenges posed by discourse analytical approaches to research is the paradox that it involves the use of language to examine language; therefore, discourse analysts cannot separate the objects of analysis from the means of analysis (cf. Billig 2008:783; Rogers et al. 2005:382; Bucholtz 2001:180). This is an unavoidable tension, however, as there is no alternative to using language in the analysis process, and so the only solution is for the analyst to exercise reflexive caution and remain vigilant about how the tools of discourse analysis might be applied to their own writing. ‘One must not lose sight of the fact that the discourse analysis itself is a text, a discourse that in turn can be analysed for its meaning and inferences, rendering the need for reflexivity to be high’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:391, citing Ashmore 1989). Apart from maintaining a constant cycle of analysis, reflection and re-analysis, there was little the researcher in the present study could do to avoid this language-based paradox.
3.3.5.2 Political agendas

Many of the ethical concerns associated with discourse analysis relate to its location within a critical research paradigm, which positions the researcher as ‘battling against an entrenched orthodoxy’ (Billig 2000:291), and as such involves political action. This is particularly relevant to CDA versions, which have been heavily criticised in the literature on the grounds of their overtly political agendas (cf. Poole 2010; Schegloff 1997). Hammersley (1997:239) explained that the controversy surrounding CDA is based not on the claim that ‘researchers can have political commitments and still pursue scientific research’, but on the basis that ‘the latter can and ought to be geared to serve the former’. The socially committed nature of critical discourse analysis, whereby researchers work to ‘expose and address social issues that may otherwise go unnoticed’ (McCloskey 2008:27), and bring their own principles of integrity and social justice to their research can be an admirable feature. Bucholtz (2001:167) described overt political commitment as ‘one of the most refreshing things about critical discourse analysis’. Indeed, Cookson (1994:117) claimed that ‘research without critical consciousness is weak knowledge because it lacks a strong sense of purpose and because it is disconnected from social structure’.

However, the presence of a strong sense of purpose can risk ‘interpretative positivism’ (Hyatt 2010:9, citing Fish 1981), ‘whereby linguistic data is used as a way of confirming decisions and interpretation already arrived at concerning the meaning of a text’, and where the selection of the data for analysis can itself be dictated by the desired research outcome (cf. Mautner 2005:815; Poole 2010:152 regarding Fairclough’s work). Verschueren (2001:66) advised that political commitments should follow from rather than guide research, as being driven by particular commitments may cause scholars to overlook certain things. Deem (1994:166) raised an interesting point regarding the political intent of researchers, noting that ‘for every person involved in the research process that the researcher may wish to empower, there are also likely to be some whom they wish to disempower’, albeit that perhaps this assumes a more transactional power relationship than that understood by Foucault. Nonetheless, the possibility that research would be implicated in the disempowerment of certain people or groups is ethically problematic. Arguably, the reason why greater attention is not paid to this in research literature relates to the very limited effects most research actually has on changing the status quo and which make its empowering or disempowering consequences insignificant; ‘an apparent slippage between thinking that the outcomes of research can critique the status quo and imagining that the critique will have any effect on that status quo’ (Deem 1994:165).

Fairclough (2001b:4) dismissed concerns about ‘political propaganda’, arguing that ‘being committed does not excuse you from arguing rationally or producing evidence for your statements’, albeit some (cf. Poole 2010) have claimed that Fairclough himself has not followed this advice. While Rogers et al. (2005:386/387) described the lack of reflexivity in some of the articles they reviewed as ‘alarming’ they concluded that ‘the twin goals of a rigorous analysis and a social justice agenda need not be incompatible’.
Nevertheless, a concern that a pre-existing blatantly political agenda cannot be reconciled with fair and impartial research is the main reason why the present study describes its research approach as ‘critical discourse analysis’ (based on Gee’s contention that all discourse analysis is inherently critical) rather than specifically ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’, even though it employs many of the tools used in CDA, and has been influenced by many researchers from the CDA tradition.

3.3.5.3 Subjectivity and positionality

Even if the political motivation characteristic of CDA approaches is denied, and if the analyst does not approach the topic with a particular agenda, since people cannot be immune to discourse, and since everyone’s understanding and interpretation of the world is discursively constructed, it is still impossible to analyse discourse/power from an entirely neutral perspective. Luke (1995:40) explained; ‘There is no space outside discourse’. The relevance of the identity of the researcher to the research (Taylor 2001:17) is arguably more of a concern in discourse analysis than in many other research approaches, albeit that issues of subjectivity and positionality apply to all research. Subjectivity was defined by St Louis and Calabrese Barton (2002) as ‘the life experiences that researchers have had as well as the social, cultural, and political factors that influence an individual and how those experiences and factors contribute to biases and assumptions in the type of research that researchers choose to engage in’. Positionality can be explained as ‘a term used to describe how people are defined, that is “not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analysed and changed” (Maher & Tetreault 1994 cited by St Louis & Calabrese Barton 2002).

People position themselves, and are positioned by others, as insiders or outsiders in particular situations or contexts arising from life experiences. The impossibility of totally stepping outside of one’s self in research was addressed by Foucault, and according to Allen (2012:4), he was not discouraged by it, arguing that ‘critique is most productive when it assumes that power is everywhere, constituting daily life, including the moral universe from within which we would like to issue our condemnations’. Similarly, Glesne and Peshkin (1992:104, cited by Semel 1994:209) were not pessimistic about the effects of subjectivity on research, stating:

‘My subjectivity is the basis for the story I am able to tell. It is the strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person and as a researcher, equipping me with the perspectives and insights that shape all I do as a researcher, from the selection of a topic clear through to the emphasis I make in my writing. Seen as a virtuous, subjectivity is something to capitalize on rather than to exorcise’.

With regard to the present research, since the researcher’s interest in parent-teacher relations arose from her experiences as a teacher, it is unlikely that she would have engaged with the topic had she not been teaching. Therefore, it can be argued that this ‘teacher’ positioning was essential for the research to proceed in the first instance. While being a teacher may complicate the exploration of parent-teacher relations, there are also advantages in terms of the knowledge that a teacher gleams incidentally about
educational discourses and parent-teacher relations, and these insights are likely to contribute to the research more so than a complete lack of prior knowledge of the issues.

Nonetheless, the vulnerability of discourse analysis, particularly of the CDA variety, to accusations of researcher bias and partiality cannot be ignored; indeed, it may be all the more pertinent in educational research, given that educational researchers tend to be researching educational settings that are familiar to them, and about which they are likely to have built up strong cultural models (Rogers et al. 2005:381/2). It is easiest to read a text critically when the researcher disagrees with it (Janks 1997:330), but inversely this is much more difficult when the text corresponds with the researcher’s own positioning, as might occur, for instance, when a teacher reads teacher produced texts. Therefore, educational discourse analysts need to pay particular attention to reflectivity and reflexivity, both in their analysis of data and their selection of it in the first instance. Patel Stevens (2011:184) defined reflexivity as ‘an act of self-reference where examination or action bends back on itself, refers to, and affects the entity instigating the action’. Ironically given that reflexivity is a core part of criticality (Hyatt 2010:3), Rogers et al. (2005:386) found very little evidence of reflexivity in the numerous CDA articles they reviewed. They noted that while researchers often include a ‘researcher role section’, thereby positioning themselves in their research, many authors did not discuss the implications of this positioning on their research findings that is they ‘did not move from reflection to reflexivity’. Rogers et al. (2005:382) remarked on the need for researchers to ‘turn the critical discourse framework back’ on themselves so as to analyse how their participation in the research ‘contributed to the reproduction or disruption of power relations’.

For the purposes of the present study, it was essential, therefore, to keep in mind how the researcher’s own experience and positioning both as an educational ‘insider’ (teacher, INTO member, PhD student, etc.) and educational ‘outsider’ (not a parent, not a policy actor, etc.) influenced the direction and outcome of the discourse analysis. Although the idea of finding one’s own position in the research initially appears straightforward, this is not necessarily so, as the work of researchers such as St Louis and Calabrese Barton (2002), Sultana (2007) and Patel Stevens (2011) attests. Indeed, Walford (1994a:90) noted that despite Becker’s (1967) exhortation that researchers should always be clear about whose side they were on, he found that it was not clear to himself whose side he was on at times during his research career. Furthermore, it is likely that a long engagement with the research topic, and documents and people in the field may well change the researcher’s positioning, and so reflection on researcher role must be an on-going process (Simon 2009:81). Bucholtz (2001:181) discussed this in terms of replacing ‘self-effacement in the research process with a heightened self-consciousness – not to indulge our narcissism but to look squarely at our own relationship to our research’, and so (p166) ‘the analyst’s choices at every step in the research process are visible……and critique does not stop with social processes….but rather extends to the analysis itself’. She (p180) noted how the ‘objectivist orientation’ of much academic writing can hinder this. While acknowledging that researchers should position themselves in their research to an adequate extent so
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that readers can judge for themselves how researcher positionality may have influenced that research, moderation is required in locating the researcher in the research to avoid what Simons (2009:91) described as ‘confessional tales’. The idea of ‘auto-ethnography’ (Foley 2002:474) was rejected in the present study, therefore, to ensure that the focus of the study remained discourses of parent-teacher relations, rather than focussing on the researcher’s engagement with such discourses.

3.3.5.4 Repetitive nature of discourse analysis

Discourse analysis can be a ceaseless process, given its assumption that texts can be interpreted in multiple ways, and that the critical reader must constantly be open to alternative readings. Discourse analysis is never ‘complete or authoritative’ being always open to new information and contexts (McCloskey 2008:27, citing Van Dijk 1997). This can be regarded as a weakness of the methodology and, indeed, Hammersley (2003:765) argued that if ‘this process of self-explication can never be completed, we might conclude that no progress toward self-explication is ever made’. However, such untidiness can also be viewed as a strength; for instance, Patterson (1997) noted that the constant ‘condition of doubt’ allows for dynamic and innovative research. Arguably the ‘messiness’ (Bucholtz 2001:179) of discourse analysis makes it particularly suitable for researching phenomena and processes that are themselves complicated and chaotic, which pertains to most human behaviour; ‘the experienced person in any field knows that things happen in a subtle, confused foggy, complex way, which cannot be stated or codified simply’ (Dexter 1970/2006:29).

Furthermore, a degree of untidiness and uncertainty in discourse analysis research is essential if reflexivity is to be assured. Since one of the tenets of discourse theory is the possibility of multiple interpretations (cf. Apple 1992), it is problematic if researchers privilege their own reading of a text or claim to be able to authoritatively interpret what an author intended. Poole (2010:152) claimed that CDA has not adequately confronted ‘the problem’ that readers interpret texts in different ways. Codd (1988:239, cited by Taylor 1997:26), offered a solution to this problem; ‘Instead of searching for authorial intentions, perhaps the proper task of policy analysis is to examine the differing effects that documents have in the production of meaning by readers’. Accepting that different researchers might well come to different findings based on the same data demands that the researcher provide strong and logical support for their contentions. Such concerns are more important than the presentation of neatly ordered and delineated research ‘findings’, albeit that this might be challenging for those who hold particular perspectives on the characteristics of ‘good’ research.

3.3.5.5 Challenges of policy-based research

Notwithstanding the arguments that are made for policy analysis throughout this paper, policy documents also have limitations in terms of their usefulness as data for discourse analysis. For instance, an analysis based on policy documents does little to overcome the ‘written language bias’ of discourse analysis that is a matter of concern to some commentators (inter alia Rogers et al. 2005:384;
Often the processes of policy-making and the contributors to the process are not clear from reading the final version of policy documents. Final versions contain compromise and sanitisation for political reasons that may obscure assumptions and objectives. Official versions of documents give the impression of consensus and agreement, often do not detail other options that may have been considered at length during the policy-making process and may oversimplify complex aspects (cf. Tansey 2007:767; Jones 1994:181). Comparing final versions of policies to draft versions provides some solution to these difficulties (Jones 1994:179), but it is not always possible to access draft versions, and a policy document may have had multiple drafts before being finalised. In circumstances where there is a vast amount of policy documentation on a topic it can be very difficult for the researcher to sort through and prioritise the most important documents without guidance from an insider in the policy-making process (Tansey 2007:767 citing Seldon & Pappworth 1983; also Jones 1994:180). Furthermore, issues of policy implementation, and the consequences of policies are usually not apparent from reading the documents themselves. A recurring challenge in the present study, for instance, surrounded the issue of what inferences can be drawn from documents/bodies that do not address parent-teacher relations, even when they might be expected to do so, and how these ‘gaps’ might be accounted for in the analysis. In order to ameliorate these weaknesses of policy analysis for the present study, it was deemed necessary to supplement the data by conducting interviews with knowledgeable policy actors and insiders, ‘those who know’ (McHugh 1994:54), and who could be expected to shed light on the processes and outcomes of various policy initiatives in Irish education. This proved to be an excellent decision.

3.3.6 Key affordances of discourse analysis, as it is used in this study

Although the limitations and potential disadvantages of discourse analysis need to be acknowledged, it is contended that the discourse analysis undertaken in this study provided a useful research methodology through which to explore the discursively focused research questions. Discourse analysis is particularly useful for foregrounding policy issues and in exploring reciprocal relationships between policy and practice. It offers possibilities for making new ‘critical’ contributions to educational research in the Irish context, and seems particularly suited to providing more nuanced accounts of issues that tend to be oversimplified, such as parental involvement in schools.

3.3.6.1 Foregrounding of policy aspects

By its nature, discourse analysis allows for the foregrounding of policy issues. The specific focus of the present study on Irish educational policy documents is justified with reference to Woodside-Jiron’s (2011:157) description of policy documents as ‘important sites for investigation’ as they are ‘well-circulated documents that serve to redefine current thinking, and specific events where particular voices, ideas or agendas are brought to the front and acted on’. She explained (p154) the importance of public policy in defining ‘how we are to act and by what rules we must abide’ and in
representing ‘the authoritative allocations of values and goals and socially situated representations of
the world’. Codd (1988:237, cited by Taylor 1997:26) explained how policy documents ‘can be said to
constitute the official discourse of the state’, although this involves a more narrow definition of policy
documents in terms of legal or government produced texts than is envisaged in this study. Arnott and
Ozga (2010:339) explained how ‘policy texts carry definitions of problems, reference particular kinds
of evidence and argument and produce “knowledge” of particular kinds to guide the implementation of
policy solutions’. Policies relating to parental involvement are, therefore, a crucial part of the picture
of parent-teacher relations in Irish education, and need to be examined in detail.

Taylor (2004) discussed at length the suitability of critical discourse analysis for examining
policy documents. Discourse analysis provides scope for nuanced explanations of the connections
between the contexts of policy-making and policy implementation, including policy influence,
acceptance and resistance. It offers possibilities for examining policies in detail, exploring their
emergence, development, assumptions and exercise of power, rather than regarding them merely as
pre-existing fixed entities that teachers/parents/schools either adapt to or ignore. This acknowledges
the operation of power at micro as well as macro levels, and the constructed nature of ideals of
parental involvement. It permits an exploration of the reciprocal relationships between policy and
practice, and of the crucial role policy plays in constructing and sustaining power relations.

3.3.6.2 ‘Critical’ contribution to educational research

Discourse analysis is located within the critical paradigm (even if it does not always describe
itself in CDA terms, cf. Gee 2011a), and as such involves social analysis, particularly the analysis of
inequality. Given the vast amount of uncontested literature supporting an association between parental
involvement and pupil attainment, the issue of parent-teacher relations can be regarded as an equality
issue. The critical elements of the methodology, therefore, give it a ‘key ethical and political role’,
demonstrating ‘how things come to be as they are, that they could be different, and thereby that they
can be changed’ (Hammersley 2003:758). The extent of commitment to the critical approach can be
seen in that discourse analysis ‘does not stop once it has analysed a problem’, but rather ‘attempts to
intervene in to social processes by proposing possible changes that could be implemented by
practitioners’ (Wodak 1999:187). Indeed, Wodak (p191) described this intention as one of the most
important challenges of CDA. While caution is advisable in making claims about the potential for
discourse analysis to change society; nonetheless, it provides new research perspectives on parent-
teacher relations that are very attractive. It may offer insights into improving parent-teacher
relationships, thereby improving societal equality. The novelty of critical research in Irish education
further increases its appeal.
3.3.6.3 Ability of discourse analysis to challenge over-simplifications

Bhatia (2006:200) made impressive claims for the usefulness of discourse analysis in his research:

‘It allowed for the realization of the interdependency of language and ideology; ideology and socio-cultural practices; and socio-cultural politics. It also made it possible for the research to excavate meaning from underneath the surface level of utterances, enabling more accurate and informed interpretations’.

Thus, the application of discourse analysis to the area of parent-teacher relationships should be valuable in moving the analysis beyond the simplistic understanding of reluctant teachers and disinterested or uninformed parents that tends to recur in discussions of parent-teacher interactions in the literature. Discourse analysis offers possibilities in accounting for the complicated and interdependent issues that affect parent-teacher relations, in offering explanations for the failure or success of certain types of relationships, and in gaining further insights by examining the relationships between official voice and lived realities more closely. Given the importance of language for interpersonal relationships, discourse analysis seems an appropriate approach to take to parent-teacher relationships.

3.3.7 Conclusion to section

The use of discourse analysis methodology, involving the application of the tools of documentary discourse analysis and a thematic analysis of Irish educational policy documents can be justified for exploring the research questions of this study. The use of documentary discourse analysis as a research instrument was augmented by elite interviewing, as is discussed in the next section.

3.4 Elite interviewing

Elite interviewing forms the second data gathering instrument of the research, with the resulting interview transcripts subjected to discourse analysis as described above, and used to widen the framing context in which the initial analysis of the policy documents was undertaken. This section provides a description of elite interviewing and discusses the design and operationalisation of elite interviewing as a research instrument in this study. The caveats and ethical issues pertaining to the use of elite interviewing are also outlined, as are the key affordances it offered to the present study.

3.4.1 Description of elite interviewing as research instrument

While in some respects elite interviews differ little from standard research interviews, they are distinguished by their semi/unstructured nature, the approach taken to the selection of interviewees and the understanding that the expertise of respondents will inform the research.

In common with ordinary research interviews, elite interviews fit the definition provided by Cannell and Kahn (1968, cited by Cohen, Mannion & Morrison 2007:351): ‘a conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by
him on content specified by research objectives’. They acknowledge ‘the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production’, as well as emphasising the ‘social situatedness of research data’. Similarly, many of the drawbacks of interviews apply regardless of the particular type; interviews are expensive in time, open to interviewer bias, can be inconvenient, may be hampered by interviewee fatigue, and raise anonymity concerns. Interviews can be used as the principal method of gathering information, to test hypotheses or to suggest new ones, and to identify variables and relationships. In conjunction with other methods they can be used for validation, to follow up on unexpected results or to explore the motivations of respondents (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007:349-383).

The ‘special non-standard’ aspects of elite interviewing include emphasising the interviewee’s definition of a situation, allowing them to structure the account of the situation, and within reason allowing them to decide what is relevant to the topic under discussion (Dexter 1970/2006:18). Elite interviewing, therefore, involves the identification of experts who can inform the researcher about the topic in question, and then conducting a conversation with them, during which the expert is relatively free to expound on the topic as they see fit. The interviewer will have formulated some (usually open-ended) questions to keep the conversation relevant to the research topic and to assist the respondent in structuring their responses. Dexter (1970/2006:18) explained that while he was unhappy with the term ‘elite’ due to its connotations of superiority, it is a useful shorthand term to describe interviewees to whom non-standard interviewing techniques were applied. ‘Elite’ interviewees do not necessarily have to be ‘elite’ in the everyday understanding of the term. Rather they are people who have the capacity to ‘teach’ the researcher about the problem, question or situation that is being explored (Dexter 1970/2006:19). Dexter’s understanding of ‘elite’ was relevant to the present study, as many of those interviewed would not be regarded as ‘elite’ by the general population, but were ‘elite’ in terms of their specific knowledge of educational policy processes.

Primarily used in the world of political science, from which much of the literature on it is drawn, elite interviewing was used to some degree in educational research prior to 1969 (Dexter 1970/2006:17) and has been increasingly used in the past two decades (cf. Walford 2011:1). As with all research methods, elite interviews vary depending on what the researcher is hoping to learn. Generally elite interviewing can be used for four purposes, as Tansey (2007:766) outlined: to corroborate what has been established from other sources, to establish what a set of people think, to make inferences about a larger population’s characteristics or decisions and to reconstruct an event or set of events. While the present study was not concerned with generalising across the population, elite interviewing was determined to be a useful strategy for widening the context in which the documentary analysis took place, allowing more information to be gathered on the processes through which the policies were formulated and to assist with the identification of influential discourses operating at various levels of the policy practice relationship.
3.4.2 The design of the elite interviewing instrument

‘What you ask is of course a function of what you want to know, but so also is how you ask the question’ (Aberbach & Rockman 2002:674) and so issues pertaining to the structure of interviews, question order, question type, the formulation of questions and the length of the interview schedule are important in determining what data will be collected during the interview process. Advice in this regard was, however, considered in light of Dexter’s (1970/2006:32) admonition that all elite interviewing decisions are dependent on the variables found in each unique interview context.

3.4.2.1 Interview structure

Since elite interviews are characterised by their conversational nature they generally follow a semi-structured or unstructured format, depending on the objectives of the interview and the confidence of the interviewer (Fitz & Halpin1994:36). Indeed, Conti (Conti & O’Neil 2007:72) described an interview situation where the respondent ‘was providing answers and my questions were, to some degree, secondary’. While he attributed this to power differentials and the agenda of the interviewee, it draws attention to the need to balance asking for specific information with allowing the interviewee the freedom to fully explain their own understanding of the topic, given that the latter is one of the main advantages of the elite interviewing approach. Asking too many specific questions interferes with the ethnographic aspects of elite interviewing (cf. Leech 2002:665). Somewhat on the contrary, Tansey (2007) argued for a semi-structured format, as set questions ensure that the interview remains focussed and that as much relevant information as possible is gained from the interviewee.

Importantly also for the novice researcher a semi-structured interview is likely to be less daunting than an unstructured one. Generally fully structured interviews are not common in elite interviewing. Although Riveria, Kozyreva and Sarovskii (2002:686) used a fully structured approach, they alternated question styles so that ‘the frequency and format of the open ended questions gave it a more semi-structured feel’. During the present research the interviewer sought to adopt a conversational tone in the interviews, based on a semi-structured set of conversational prompts.

Even in an unstructured or semi-structured interview, the order in which questions are asked is consequential. Researchers vary in the importance they attach to question order; for instance, Fitz and Halpin (1994) and Gewitz and Ozga (1994) demonstrated different approaches to the issue. Many elite interviewers advise starting with the simpler, factually-based questions and then moving to ‘the more interpretative or judgmental questions’, even if the latter are of most interest, as this gives the interviewee time to settle down (Peabody, Webb Hammond, Torcom, Browne, Thompson & Kolodny 1990:453). Similarly, sensitive questions should be asked towards the middle or end of the interview and not asked consecutively (cf. Leech 2002:666; Morrissey 1970/2006:96). Leech recommended asking personal questions last, so as to keep the focus on the policy issues rather than on the interviewee themselves. Notwithstanding the value of this advice, in cases where time is very limited or doubtful, perhaps it would be best to ask the most important questions first, rather than risk omitting
them entirely. In any event, it is unlikely that questions relating to parental involvement would be perceived as particularly sensitive or embarrassing by interviewees. Nonetheless, the point about maintaining the focus away from the individual was applicable to the present study and so personal questions were generally avoided.

In keeping with the conversational approach, Peabody et al. (1990:453) advised that the interviewer know their schedule of questions well so that they can adjust the questioning to suit the conversation that develops. Berry (2002:680) noted the importance of not spending a long time on a particular line of questioning if it is proving unproductive, and the importance of flexibility was, similarly, stressed by McHugh (1994:60). With regard to moving between questions, it was recommended that the interviewer have some ‘stock bridges’ to allow a return to subjects where more information is needed during the course of the interview, e.g. ‘it’s really interesting that you mentioned…because…’ (Berry 2002:680). These ‘bridges’ do not have to make logical sense according to Berry, as the interviewee is not going to have time to wonder how the interviewer moved between topics as well as answering the next question. However, it is worth bearing in mind that when providing a full transcript to the interviewee, as was done in this study, the transcript reads better if the bridging comments are plausible.

Obviously the amount of topics discussed during the interview will depend on the amount of time allocated to it, the objectives of the researcher, and the length of the answers provided by the respondents. As a general guideline, Peabody et al. (1990:453) recommended a fairly short initial interview schedule, perhaps with eight to ten questions, but the interviewer should be prepared to expand the schedule if there is time, or when the interviewee is eager to talk, to ensure that full value is gained from the interview opportunity. Rather than trying to ask too many questions in a limited time frame, it seems sensible to ask the interviewee if additional questions or clarifications can be asked at a later date if necessary (cf. Woliver 2002:678). Since it would be a waste of time and may even insult respondents to ask them information that can be easily accessed elsewhere, this is advised against (Leech 2002:666; Peabody et al. 1990:452; Walford 2011), except when such information is being used to double-check the veracity of a respondent.

3.4.2.2 Question type

Consistent with the conversational approach, elite interviews tend to rely on open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow the interviewee greater opportunity to direct the conversation, befitting their elite status. This may of itself shed light on the processes being researched, as well allowing the interviewee to fully articulate their responses (Aberbach & Rockman 2002:674; also Kogan 1994:71). Open-ended questions are more likely to avoid the data limitations that can arise if the interviewer assumes they are familiar with the topic, but actually asks ‘the wrong questions in the wrong way’ (Leech 2002:665), although the danger of this decreases as the interviewer’s expertise of the topic grows. Riveria et al. (2002:686) noted how open-ended questions demonstrate respect for the
complexity of the respondent’s views; therefore, they asked open-ended questions at the start of their interviews to ‘earn’ the right to later ask questions ‘posed exclusively from our frame of reference’. Similarly, Aberbach and Rockman (2002:674) found that highly educated people ‘do not like being put in the straitjacket of close-ended questions’. The vast majority of questions asked during the elite interviews for the present research were open-ended, with close-ended only used when clarification was necessary.

Open-ended questions present disadvantages as well, among them concerns such as coding, the time spent on interviews, the time taken to transcribe them, and the limits imposed on data analysis given the volume of interview data generated (Aberbach & Rockman 2002:674). Close-ended questions tended to be preferred if a number of researchers were conducting interviews or if generalisability was an interest (cf. Riveria et al. 2002, Berry 2002). However, these are concerns more of quantitative than qualitative research, and did not apply to any great extent to the present study, with the challenges of transcribing and analysing large amounts of data unavoidable given its discourse analysis approach. More pertinently perhaps, Riveria et al. (2002:686) noted the demanding nature of open-ended questions on respondents, (and, indeed, on interviewers) and so they presented both open and close ended questions ‘in an alternating fashion’ in their interviews to allow the respondents time to recover from answering the open-ended questions. While this appeared to be a reasonable course of action, in the present study the researcher did not see scope for a great many close-ended questions, and therefore, she used other strategies to allow the interviewee recovery time if that appeared necessary.

3.4.2.3 Formulation of questions

Even if many elite interviewers do not precisely script their open-ended conversational prompts prior to each interview, attention needs to be paid to the language and wording of the questions asked. Much practical advice was found in the literature regarding the avoidance of words that might be perceived to be judgemental or threatening by the interviewee (cf. Morrissey, 1970/2006: 95; Ball 1994b:111; Bacchi 2000:50; Leech 2002:666). As a general rule, it is advised to keep questions neutral (Peabody et al. 1990:452), and to avoid ‘presuming questions’. However, Leech (2002:666) found that in some circumstances, such as ‘when the question is one that the respondent is likely to try to avoid and involves a matter that may have a stigma attached to it, a presuming question may be the only way to go’. Morrissey (1970/2006:96) recommended that questions be as brief as possible.

As well as the ‘stock bridges’ mentioned in Section 3.4.2.1, ‘grand tour questions’, ‘example questions’ and ‘prompt questions’ are useful strategies in elite interviewing (Leech 2002:667, citing Spradley 1979). The ‘grand tour’ question asks for a verbal tour of something that is well known to the respondent, and can be a useful way of encouraging the respondent to talk in a focussed manner about something that is familiar to them but new for the interviewer. Example questions are useful in
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encouraging the interviewee to discuss what actually happens or has happened in the organisation, although they can be hypothetical as well as direct (Leech 2002:667). In addition to directly prompting the interviewee to provide more information on a topic area, informal or ‘floating prompts’ such as putting one’s head to one side, leaving a moment’s silence or asking ‘and then…?’ can be helpful in gaining more insight during the interview. Berry (2002:681; also Morrissey 1970/2006:96) noted how effective saying nothing and staring expectantly at the subject for a few moments can be as ‘Silence immediately creates tension and the interviewer should be patient to allow the subject to break that uncomfortable silence by speaking again’, although allowing tension to develop may counteract the interviewer’s natural tendency to want to put the interviewee at ease. In some circumstances it can also be useful to make a statement that the interviewee will disagree with, in order to encourage them to explain their position (Ball 1994b:112). Woliver (2002:678) recommended finishing interviews by asking a question such as ‘Is there anything you would like to tell me about which I haven’t thought to ask you?’ While she was writing about personal rather than specifically elite interviewing, this seems a particularly useful strategy for elite interviewing. It recognises the expertise of the interviewee, acknowledges that the interviewer may not have even known the relevant questions to ask, and allows the interviewer to identify what the interviewee regards as the most important aspect of the topic under discussion. The researcher in the present study took note of such questioning tactics when designing the interview schedule and concluded each interview by asking if the interviewee wanted to add anything they deemed relevant.

Arnott and Ozga (2010:342) described how their examination of policy documents gave them an ‘overview’ and ‘the main elements of a lexicon’ about their research topic which they used to develop their interview schedule. The discourse analysis fulfilled a similar purpose in the present study, allowing the identification of themes, tensions and queries that were explored further in the interviews. Given the unstructured format of the interviews, the questions asked of each interviewee differed somewhat, although they all addressed the same themes of policy formation and the interviewee’s perceptions of parent-teacher relations in Ireland, and most were open-ended in form. In cases where a policy document was associated with the interviewee’s organisation, specific questions were asked about it. (See Appendix F for the conversation prompts used during interviewing).

3.4.3 Operationalisation of the elite interviewing stage of the research

The elite interviewing stage of the data collection took place after most of the relevant policy documents for the study had been identified and analysed. Full transcripts of each interview were prepared and these were subjected to tool-based and thematic analysis, as well as being comparatively analysed with the document associated with the interviewee’s organisation, when possible. Therefore, the issues discussed above with regard to the operationalisation of documentary discourse analysis apply to the discourse analysis of the interview transcripts as well. Additional issues relating
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specifically to the elite interviewing stage of the research included: the selection of potential interviewees, the acquisition of access to interviewees, and the conduct of the interviews.

3.4.3.1 Selection of interviewees

The selection of relevant experts to interview is an essential precondition for elite interviewing contributing to a successful research project. The ideal interviewee is/was a ‘significant player’ in the relevant area, has a strong memory, and is ‘willing to disclose their knowledge of events in an impartial manner’ (Tansey 2007:767). For the purposes of the present study, the objective of the elite interviews was to shed light on the processes of policy-making and implementation with regard to parental involvement in Irish education. As such, it was the perspectives of key people regarding parental involvement within the organisations involved in educational policy action in Ireland that were most pertinent. The interviewees were selected because of their (past or on-going) roles in those organisations, for the insights they were able to provide on the policy-making process, and with regard to particular initiatives or documents relating to parental involvement in Irish schools. The interviewees were also likely to be knowledgeable about the perspective and mind-set of their organisation.

Sampling concerns in the present study then required a procedure that identified those that had most involvement with the processes of interest. Since no attempt was being made to generalise about the full sample of policy actors in Irish education, it was unnecessary to draw a representative sample of the larger population. Indeed, as Tansey (2007:765) outlined, random sampling would be counterproductive if it caused the most relevant interviewees to be omitted purely by chance. While the use of non-probability sampling may be regarded as inferior to non-probability sampling by those of a quantitative persuasion (cf. Rivera et al. 2002:683) it is difficult to dispute its suitability for the purposes of the present study. Both Dexter (1970/2006:21) and Gewirtz and Ozga (1994:191) discussed how a fuller understanding may be obtained by focussing on a few key informants (assuming that they are well chosen) rather than by less intensive investigations with a greater number. Hence, a limited number of key policy actors were identified and interviews requested from them.

Some key informants were identified incidentally during the documentary analysis stage of the research. Once the initial respondents had been identified the researcher relied on personal networks and direct contact in order to access them, with the hope that this would then lead to a form of snowball sampling, a strategy used by Conti and O’Neil (2007:69). This sampling process was also informed by Tansey’s (2007:770) description of the ‘Reputational Snowball Method’, which involves asking each interviewee for a list of the people they believe to be influential in the same field or policy area, or who might be able to contribute to the study. This strengthens the process of non-probability sampling, as it can help to identify respondents who might otherwise be ignored, especially in a study such as the present one, where influential policy actors in the area of parental involvement do not necessarily have a high public profile. Furthermore, this approach has advantages in assessing the
level of influence and involvement of particular individuals ‘as the number of nominations each person receives provides an indication of their stature within a policy or issue arena’ (Tansey 2007:770, citing Farquharson 2005). Dexter (1970/2006:44) did, however, provide the caveat that people tend to recommend people they like, and so not all referrals can be taken at face value. While a number of interviewees suggested people they thought would be helpful to the present study, one policy insider in particular provided a comprehensive list of names that was very helpful.

Having analysed the policy documents and discussed the research with a well placed policy insider (who was not an interviewee), ten influential organisations in terms of Irish educational policy-making were identified as potential sources of interviewees: INTO, NPC-P, IPPN, CPSMA, Church of Ireland Board of Education, Educate Together, An Foras Pátrúnachta, Gaelscoileanna Teo, DES and NCCA. In some cases particular key policy insiders were readily identified in these organisations, in other cases useful names emerged as the interviews progressed. A number of interviewees suggested a particular Education Consultant as being insightful in this area, and so she was added to the list of potential interviewees.

3.4.3.2 Access to interviewees

Gaining access to the elite interviewees can be more problematic than identifying them, due to the busy and ‘elite’ nature of the lives of potential respondents. Accordingly much of the literature of elite interviewing is devoted to how researchers can utilise their existing networks to access interviewees, and how they need to pay attention to their own characteristics and demeanour to improve their chances of successful access.

While difficulty accessing informants can be a feature of every research project, Riveria et al. (2002:684) described ‘the extraordinarily busy lives of the respondents’ as a problem ‘endemic to elite interviewing’. This results in interviewees being unable to grant time to researchers even when they felt inclined to do so. Similarly, Conti and O’Neil (2007:71) discussed the difficulties of scheduling and actually obtaining uninterrupted interview time with very busy people. Sinclair and Brady (1987, cited by Walford 1994b:224) found that ‘arriving for an interview only to have it postponed is probably the norm rather than the exception’. During the present study the researcher asked the interviewee to choose the interview time and location and made every effort to minimise inconvenience to the interviewees. Fortunately, none of the interviews once arranged were cancelled.

Given the political science background of many elite interviewers, much of the discussion of access in the literature centred on political circles, where access is likely to be particularly problematic, due both to the fluidity of the political environment and fears that data obtained would be used by political opponents (Riveria et al. 2002:684). Difficulties caused by the power differential between researcher and informant, and the number of gatekeepers that have to be negotiated before making contact with the potential interviewee (Conti & O’Neil 2007:67) are also relevant in political spheres. In the present research many of the politically inspired concerns around granting interviews
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did not apply to Ireland’s educational policy-makers. Furthermore parental involvement is not a particularly contentious or sensitive issue and so the topic itself did not seem likely to cause interviewees to be reluctant to participate.

In terms of coping with interview refusals, while in some circumstances it is essential to interview a particular person, in others it may be possible to adjust the interview target somewhat. Although Goldstein (2002:670-672) was writing from a quantitative perspective, his point that elite interviewers have an advantage over other types of interviewers because ‘they typically know more about the characteristics and attitudes of their non-respondents’, applies to qualitative studies also, in that it is possible to determine who/what organisation has been omitted and substitute accordingly. For instance, looking beyond the immediately identifiable interviewees to ‘backroom people’ may be a useful strategy to increase one’s chances of successfully accessing interviewees (cf. Aberbach & Rockman 2002:673). This strategy was employed during the present research by asking the initially identified interviewee if someone else in the organisation would be willing to be interviewed, and this proved useful in the case of the IPPN where another senior official made themselves available even when the initially identified respondent did not. Likewise, the advice that the recently retired tend to be more easily accessible may be useful (Ball 1994b:98), even with the caveat that the retired may be interested in trying to ‘set the record straight’ or write themselves into history; therefore, caution is required when analysing the interview data (Walford 1994b:224). Arguably though, this applies to all interviews whether the interviewee is retired or not. Selwyn (2013) also advocated ‘retrospective elite interviewing’, on the grounds of the greater openness and, consequently, better insights of retired interviewees. One interview was conducted with a retired person in the current study (the Education Consultant). Even in cases where access is absolutely denied, it can, according to Dexter (1970/2006:37) be possible to mine the circumstances, excuses and reactions with which refusals are made for useful data. In the present study this ‘mining’ proved difficult, however, especially when interview requests were ignored rather than directly refused. While it could be that those organisations that refused or ignored the interview requests did not prioritise parent-teacher relations highly, it could equally be that they did not prioritise postgraduate research highly, or that they genuinely were too busy.

Making use of existing personal and professional connections in order to increase one’s chances of accessing elites was frequently mentioned in the literature (inter alia Dexter 1970/2006 38-40; McHugh 1994:54). Both Goldstein (2002:671) and Dexter (1970/2006:39) discussed elaborate efforts to enhance one’s networking capability and so improve access to interviewees. Points of access include the institutional or personal affiliations of the researcher. In difficult political circumstances, Riveria et al. (2002:684) found that having an institutional affiliation was important, as it reassured people that the researcher was undertaking academic rather than political work. Interviewees themselves may act as sponsors for the researcher, assisting with access to their elite peers; ‘If you have established a good rapport with a particular respondent, do not be shy about enlisting their help in
getting in the door with others on your sample list’ (Goldstein 2002:671). Walford (2011:2) noted the importance of this sponsorship, but also the importance of not appearing to be sponsored by the ‘wrong’ people as this may cause elites to be antagonistic to the researcher. Even if interviewees do not directly assist with accessing other elites, if confidentiality agreements allow the researcher to mention who they have already interviewed this can be helpful in encouraging others to agree to be interviewed as well (McHugh 1994:56). Without doubting the benefits of starting with people the researcher has ready access to, it is notable, however, that Dexter (1970/2006:43) warned that starting with ‘one’s own kind of people’ may lead to the interviewer’s pre-existing assumptions remaining unchallenged for longer than is desirable. Personal and professional connections were helpful in gaining access to interviewees in the present study, especially with regard to the IPPN and Senior Inspector. In the first case, a colleague of the researcher who is a member of the IPPN rang the IPPN to advocate on her behalf when the initial interview request was refused, while in the second the INTO interviewee was helpful in recommending the researcher to the Inspector. The researcher set up a Linked-In account during the interview phase of the research to enhance her online profile in relation to her research interests.

Researchers’ personal characteristics may affect their chances of gaining access. For instance, the need for persistence on the part of the researcher was a recurrent theme in the literature (Peabody et al. 1990:453; also Riveria et al. 2002:684). The need for persistence is all the greater when a network of gatekeepers has to be negotiated (cf. Conti & O’Neil 2007:67). Hammer and Wildavsky (1989, cited by Peabody et al. 1990:454) noted that elite interviewers require courage, resilience and self-management, while Cookson (1994:128) remarked on the importance of the researcher’s professional reputation for access purposes. In the present study not receiving any reply to interview requests was a frustrating problem, as at least a refusal left the position clear. In some cases polite persistence paid off, as interviews were achieved after a number of letters and emails had been sent to various people in particular organisations (including IPPN, NCCA, NPC-P) although in other cases multiple forms of approach were ignored.

When beginning to consider accessing respondents, the researcher, being female and relatively young, took heart from Gewirtz and Ozga’s (1994:193; youth also discussed by Dexter 1970/2006:41) experience that young females have the best chance of gaining access to elites, as they are perceived as being less threatening, although the inverse of this is the risk of not being taken seriously. In any event the researcher had no sense of her age or gender influencing the interviews in any way.

Much of the advice relating to accessing interviewees is of a common-sense nature. For example, great emphasis was placed on the provision of an initial letter or information leaflet to interviewees when requesting the interview, (albeit Dexter 1970/2006:47 was less enthusiastic about introductory letters) and it was stressed that this should be on ‘the most prestigious, non-inflammatory letterhead you have access to’ (Aberbach & Rockman 2002:674; also Peabody 1990:453; Goldstein 2002:671). This letter should include a basic outline of the research being undertaken, the amount of
time that will be required from the interviewee, contact and supervisor details, and an explanation of how the information gathered will be used (Goldstein 2002:671). Goldstein’s advice was followed in the present study, with a brief outline of the research provided in the preliminary email sent to potential interviewees. A more detailed information leaflet on UCD headed paper, and in compliance with UCD’s ethics procedures, was attached to these initial emails, and a printed version brought to the interviews. (See Appendix E). Further common sense advice related to the importance of politeness to gatekeepers as well as to the potential interviewee (Peabody et al. 453), and ensuring that the interviewer presents and dresses him/herself appropriately for the particular interview context (Conti & O’Neil 2007:73). Practical issues such as making travel arrangements carefully, arriving in good time and choosing a suitable interview location are also likely to affect the success of the interview (McHugh 1994:59; Dexter 1970/2006:48-49) and were borne in mind by the researcher when organising the interviews.

The response of elites to an interview request is to some extent and in some respects beyond the control of the researcher, which supports the sense that getting interviews is ‘more art than science’ (Goldstein 2002:669). The underlying theme of much of the comments made in the literature regarding access to elites relates to making the best use of whatever access is granted, no matter how limited. ‘The bottom line is that there are no silver bullet solutions, and scheduling and completing elite interviews takes a fair bit of luck’ (Goldstein 2002:671). Fortunately, in the present study, despite some refusals, it was possible to interview key policy actors from teacher, parent, management and DES perspectives. The Education Consultant’s contribution was important from a contextual and overview perspective. While the failure to access respondents from the Church of Ireland Board of Education, the Gaelscoil movement, and particularly CPSMA was disappointing, it was not devastating to the research, given that a broad range of policy insiders were successfully accessed. (See Appendix D for list of interviews undertaken).

3.4.3.3 The conduct of the interviews

Although much of the advice regarding research interviews in general is applicable to elite interviewing, Aberbach and Rockman (2002:674) drew attention to the discrepancies between them, stating that techniques for elite interviewing do not necessarily follow ‘textbook advice’. Much of this relates to the conversational approach taken in elite interviews, meaning that ‘the best interviewer is not one who writes the best questions. Rather excellent interviewers are excellent conversationalists’ (Berry 2002:679). Other points of advice found in the literature in relation to conducting elite interviews successfully include the use of a naïve stance by researchers, the importance of building rapport with interviewees and the practicalities of audio-recording.

Interviewees may be nervous about participating in research because they feel they will be ‘caught out’ by not knowing the answer to a question, or by a feeling of academic inadequacy (inter alia Dexter 1970/2006:37). Riveria et al. (2002:685) advised reassuring the respondent that there are
no ‘right answers’ and ‘any answers they could provide in and of themselves would constitute very valuable information for us’. Some have suggested that the interviewer should ‘play dumb’, in order to make the interviewee feel at an advantage (cf. Leech 2002:665). However, the inverse of this is that the interviewee may not want to cooperate with someone they perceive to be an ‘idiot’ (Leech 2002:665) and although Leech did not refer to it, may have negative consequences for the reputation of the interviewer in a small circle like that of Ireland’s educational community. Leech’s argument for a middle road seems indubitable; ‘The interviewer should seem professional and generally knowledgeable, but less knowledgeable than the respondent on the particular topic of the interview’. Similar advice was provided by McHugh (1994:63), and Ball (1994b:99) who described the need to tread a ‘fine line’ between ‘knowledgeability and naivety’. Peabody et al. (1990:453) advised starting the interview with a question or comment that demonstrates that the interviewer has done their ‘homework’ but needs further information. This is in accordance with a core characteristic of elite interviewing, in that the interviewee is positioned as the expert and is, therefore, to be allowed to explain to the interviewer. During the present research, while the researcher had discursively analysed and was very familiar with the policies of parental involvement, she had little knowledge of the policy-making processes behind them; thus, she treaded the ‘fine line’ between knowledgeability and naivety without any artifice.

In any interview context, building rapport between interviewer and interviewee is important. While much of this rapport building is based on the norms of everyday social interaction, the power differential between researcher and respondent in elite interviewing scenarios can affect it. Small talk about a person’s background would be a common way to start interviews and, indeed, was recommended by Aberbach and Rockman (2002:675), but sometimes this may have the effect of making the interview personal, which may not be helpful if the researcher is seeking organisational perspectives. Also what the interviewer perceives as an innocuous personal question may be perceived quite differently by the interviewee (cf. Riveria et al. 2002:686). Such concerns may not apply in Ireland given that making small talk is a major feature of Irish people’s social interaction but, nonetheless, the elite interviewer might be advised to allow the interviewee to take the lead in chit-chat or confine themselves to harmless ice-breakers (Peabody et al. 1990:453). Leech (2002:666) recommended that the interviewer’s demeanour should suggest friendliness and curiosity, and she noted that despite their elite and often powerful status, respondents may well still be nervous about participating in a research interview, and so putting them at ease is important.

As with all social interaction, but particularly in the context of elites who are used to being heeded, providing evidence of listening is an important part of building rapport. This can range from basic strategies such as nodding, saying ‘mmm’, giving the interviewee adequate time to respond, etc., to re-stating what the interviewee has just said using their own words at the end of a section (Leech 2002:666/7). Careful listening is required if the interviewer is to respond and adapt to the style of the interviewee, as Ball (1994b:106) states is necessary when carrying out ethnographic type interviews.
Dexter (1970/2006:50) termed this ‘concentrated attention’ and remarked on how demanding it can be for researchers, despite being something that is often taken for granted. In the present study a conscious effort was made during the interviews to exercise the patience and restraint that Simons (2009:47) advised is necessary if actively listening.

In spite of the attention paid to the importance of building rapport in the literature, Mickelson (1994, cited by Walford 2011:3) made a contrary point when she argued that too much of a concern with building rapport may lead to ‘bland answers that are insufficiently challenged’. Therefore, in some circumstances a more confrontational style, where the interviewee is confronted about evasive answers, may be more satisfactory in terms of data collection. For example, Nadel (1939, cited by Dexter 1970/2006:32) recommended a ‘bullying technique’, albeit the passage of time since his work was undertaken means caution is needed in applying his findings to the modern world. McHugh (1994:62) used the metaphor of the courtroom cross examination, where witnesses are not allowed to merely present evidence in the way that they wish, although he qualified this by stating that interviews are not courtroom-based, and that there must be some empathy between interviewer and interviewee. Kogan (1994:72) noted that the most difficult questions to ask are those that might reveal a failure on the part of the interviewee, and commented that the tendency to avoid such questions may result from either cowardice or prudence, but he concluded that ‘it is better to get an incomplete interview than none at all’. Since all interviews are different, it is impossible to specify universal rules in this regard. Rather the interviewer will have to judge how far they can press each interviewee on difficult topics without damaging rapport, while also bearing in mind the consequences a confrontational style might have in terms of gaining access to other interviewees. As the interviewer in the present study would have found it difficult to adopt a confrontational style, Kogan’s maxim about incomplete information being better than none at all was embraced. This point was particularly relevant during one particular interview where the interviewee made a number of ‘off the record’ comments. The researcher did not press the interviewee to go on the record to maintain the flow of the interview, and also because the information provided by the interviewee in the ‘off the record’ format was not deemed of crucial importance to the research.

The semi or unstructured format, and the open-ended questions usually asked in elite interviews make the requirement to audio record the interviews almost unavoidable, (cf. Berry 2002:682). Despite this, some researchers conduct elite interviews without audio recording them. For instance, Fenno (1978, cited by Peabody et al. 1990:453) recommended relying on one’s own memory and did not advocate either note-taking or recording. Woliver (2002:678) remarked that she had stopped using recorders as she found them intrusive, but this may be related to the deeply personal nature of her research. Undeniably audio recording interviews does have its disadvantages, among them the possibility that people may not want to be recorded for the record, that they may be inhibited and as a result ‘the interview loses its spontaneity and answers may be hedged or guarded’ (Peabody et al. 1990:454). Arguably, however, these are outweighed by the advantages of recording, which
include permitting the production of a complete and accurate transcript, allowing the interviewer to maintain eye contact, keeping the sense of an informal conversation, and perhaps most importantly meaning that the researcher does not have to rely on his/her own memory (Peabody et al. 1990:454).

Audio-recording was deemed essential in the present study, as it would have been impossible to analyse metaphors, vocabulary, tenses and foregrounding from memory, and if this was to be attempted from notes the amount of note-taking required during the interview would mean that the interview would have a dictational rather than conversational tone. While some notes were taken during the interviews, this was for reasons such as reducing the interviewer’s nerves, neutralising body language (inter alia Kogan 1994:73; Simons 2009:53), providing a reason to ask for clarification, and to give the respondent time to recover from long answers, rather than to provide a full record of the interview. Arguably since the advent of social media and video sharing internet sites people are now more familiar with being recorded than they were even in 2002; indeed, none of the interviewees expressed any concern about being recorded. The inverse of this, however, is that there are now more possibilities for embarrassing people by misusing recordings than there were in the past. The use of audio recordings allowed for the production of a transcript which served to ‘freeze the discourse’ (Green, Weade & Graham 1988, cited by Forman & McCormick 1995:152) and was crucial in allowing discursive analysis of the interview data.

As soon as possible after the interviews, they were transcribed by the researcher and a copy provided to each interviewee. In light of Bucholtz’s (2000) insights into the effects of transcriber decisions on transcripts, each interview was transcribed verbatim, which reduced the potential for such decisions. Apart from minor clarifications, none of the interviewees asked to amend their accounts.

3.4.4 Caveats/concerns regarding the use of elite interviewing as a research method

As with all research methods, elite interviewing is not without its disadvantages and weaknesses, most notably the consequences of power differentials between interviewer and interviewee, the difficulty inherent in getting honest responses from interviewees and in evaluating the responses obtained, and the onerous nature of elite interviewing for the researcher. Although validity and reliability issues have raised concerns in other studies, they are not particularly applicable to the present one, given its discursive focus.

3.4.4.1 Power differentials between interviewer and interviewee

While power issues are relevant to all forms of research that involve human interaction, the likelihood that it is the interviewee rather than the interviewer that has the greater capacity to exercise power in the elite interviewing context can pose specific challenges. This is evident from the difficulties encountered regarding access to elites, and can also be apparent in the interview environment itself. Conti (Conti & O’Neil 2007: 71-73) elaborated on how power differentials affected his interviews, discussing the difficulties he encountered in trying to keep a measure of
control over the interviews given that the interviewees were used to being in control, and he recounted how respondents tended to shape his questions to suit their preferred answers. The latter point provides an example of the power dynamic defining ‘how knowledge is created’ as well as shaping the interview process (Conti & O’Neil 2007:67). The process of knowledge creation may also be affected by the probable tendency of the interviewer to feel well-disposed to more co-operative interviewees, and more critical of the difficult ones (inter alia Kogan 1994; Gewirtz & Ozga 1994:194), as well perhaps as being concerned with not offending the most powerful ones (Cookson 1994:127).

Similarly, while Riveria et al. (2002:685) made use of the power differential to help them access interviewees; ‘we would remind them that we were only the requesting party, they always had the last word’, they also discussed (citing Ostrander 1993) the ‘potential pitfall’ of being overly deferential and concerned with establishing rapport, thereby losing the ability to control the direction and scope of the interview. This risks ‘reproducing the discourse of the powerful’ (Fitz & Halpin 1994:48). Indeed, there is a paradox inherent in the possibility that if being seen as ‘perfectly harmless’ (Walford 2011:2) helps the researcher access interviewees, this may then constrain the success of the interview when it does occur.

While obviously interviewer resilience and personality will be important in influencing how they cope with power-based problems, solutions presented in the literature tend to revolve around the idea of having adequate ‘homework’ done on the interviewee, such that they take the researcher seriously (cf. Richards 1996; Zuckerman 1972, cited by Riveria et al. 2002:685; Hunter 1993, cited by Walford 2011:2; Phillips 1998:9). How this ‘homework’ might be disclosed during the interview is debatable, however, with, for instance, Riveria et al. (2002:685) of the opinion that it is better not to indicate that anything is known about the respondents as ‘revealing knowledge about interviewees ... might raise too many doubts about anonymity’. Such a stance may not apply if interviewing well-known figures in Irish education, as it would be expected that an educational researcher would have some basic information about them. Related to the idea of preparation, it is notable that among the justifications Fitz and Halpin (1994:36,37) provided for using a semi-structured interview approach was that the question schedule was an aid to them in exerting some control over the progress of the interview, as well as acting as prompt sheet which demonstrated their preparation to the interviewee. Regardless of the precise form it takes, being well prepared for the interview and having a degree of background knowledge is likely to enhance the confidence and competence of the interviewer; hence, making them less vulnerable to the negative consequences of a power imbalance in the interview scenario.

Notwithstanding the potential consequences of power imbalances in elite interviews, it is important not to overstate them and, indeed, Gewirtz and Ozga (1994:194) criticised the tendency of the research community to overestimate the difficulties of researching powerful people. Conti and O’Neil (2007:68) found that ‘studying those in positions of power invokes similar types of methodological problems as studying those excluded from power networks: problems of access,
problems of authority in the interview setting, problems related to language, style and cultural capital’, and so the power-based challenges of elite interviewing may not actually differ all that greatly from other research interviews. Furthermore, the power differential may actually be an advantage to the study from an ethical perspective, as ‘In the practice of studying elites there is less need to protect elites from the power of the researcher’ (Conti & O’Neil 2007:79; also Cookson 1994, ) albeit ethical considerations remain important and the human dignity of interviewees must be respected (Jones 1994:183). Also, much of the literature discussing power imbalances relates to a political (and often Washington-based context), where the interviewees are in positions of substantial power, whereas in the present study there was a greater correlation between the background and profession of the researcher and those being interviewed, and so power differentials were not as relevant. During the present study while power differentials were perceived at times in relation to access to interviewees, once the interviews were arranged they were no longer apparent, perhaps due to the shared interest of the interviewer and interviewee in Irish primary education.

3.4.4.2 Potential difficulties in evaluating the accounts obtained

From a discourse analysis perspective ‘truth’ is understood as a subjective and variable construct, and the need to constantly critique what appears to be ‘truth’ is a central feature of such a research approach. Nevertheless, the elite interviewer will be concerned if interviewees do not give honest responses, whether due to deliberate dishonesty or genuine memory lapses. In the case of deliberate dishonesty, it might well be that the gap between fact and fiction in the interviewee’s account would provide an interesting and useful insight (especially for discourse analysis) into their concerns and priorities (Berry 2002:680). However, the difficulty is that given the nature of elite interviewing, where the researcher is often dependent on the account of one particular expert, it can be almost impossible to identify this gap. Thus, obtaining honest responses is a preoccupation of the elite interviewer, and an issue to which much attention is paid in the literature (cf. Phillips 1998:10).

Arguably the elite position of the interviewees allows for the possibility that they are practiced in presenting best case scenarios if not in outright deception, as ‘many political actors are skilled interviewees’ (Ball 1994b:96). Batteson and Ball (1995:202/203) described how elite policy communities are ‘occupationally manipulative, periodically selective and sometimes aggressively deceptive…’ and how they ‘skilfully deploy tactics absorbed from the socio-cultural world that they inhabit’, being ‘confident in regulating openness, can invalidate lines of inquiry, deflect the inappropriate’, thereby ‘weaving a narrative of justification’. Similarly, Tansey (2007:767) noted how interviewees can ‘misrepresent their own positions’ although, interestingly, not always for their own advantage, as he cited Seldon and Pappworth’s (1983) example of how civil servants have a tendency to under-represent their role in policy-making. Policy-makers tend to be interested in portraying a ‘careful, multi-dimensional process of policy-making’ to the public (George & Bennett 2005, cited by Tansey 2007:767). Berry (2002:680) took a less cynical position, arguing ‘interviewers must always
keep in mind that it is not the obligation of a subject to be objective and to tell the truth’. He pointed out that the interviewee has a purpose in agreeing to an interview request, just as the interviewer has in requesting it, and since interviewees are talking about their work and justifying what they do ‘that’s no small matter’ from their perspective. Nevertheless, he too cautioned interviewers about the need to constantly critique what they are told, noting how ‘seductive’ it can be if an interviewee appears to be ‘going out of his way not to give you the party line’, but that this can be among the ploys used by skilful elites to encourage the interviewer to believe their version of events.

Even when the interviewee is not deliberately trying to deceive the interviewer, they still may not provide entirely accurate accounts. ‘The inevitable failings of memory’ (Kramer, Allyn, Blight & Welch 1990:213) explain some inaccuracies, although memory is a more complex issue than simple forgetfulness. Since memory is ‘a medium for the construction and reconstruction of personal history and experience’, the tendency of people to contrast ‘a rosy past’ with ‘a gloomy present’ can result in the distortion of the past (Batteson & Ball 1995:204). Recent events and experiences can alter people’s recall of past occurrences (Dexter 1970/2006:112). Jephcote and Davies (2004:551) noted the possibility of ‘post hoc reflections’ and ‘post hoc rationalizations’. Interviewees may be concerned not to be misinterpreted or to say something that may later reflect badly on them, and this self-censorship can constrain the accounts they provide, particularly in relation to sensitive topics or if the interviewee is in a politically precarious position (Walford 2011:4). The interviewer may also self-censor, both during the interview and in their later account of it, for instance, to retain good relations for future research (Walford 1994a:230; Walford 2011:4). This is of particular relevance in small communities such as that of Irish education, where the probability of the interviewer and interviewee meeting again is high. Fitz and Halpin (1994:41) noted how in some environments, such as the civil service, officials are ‘predisposed to disclose very little’, even when there is no necessity for secrecy. Getting the ‘truth’ is, therefore, not guaranteed.

Advice to constantly critique what one is being told by the interviewee recurs in the literature as a means to avoid the limitations associated with dishonest or inaccurate responses. Data obtained from elite interviewing must be constantly revisited as more data is obtained, in order to check the accuracy of the texts themselves and to ensure that the researcher’s interpretation is always subject to new information received. In some cases obvious implausibility in accounts makes this relatively straightforward (Dean & Whyte 1979/2006:105), but often it is more difficult. George and Bennett’s (2005, cited by Tansey 2007:767) list of recommended questions that the researcher should ask themselves involves applying tools of discourse analysis; ‘Who is speaking?, Who are they speaking to?, For what purpose are they speaking?, Under what circumstances are they speaking?’ Further to this, Berry (2002:680) suggested asking the subject to critique his/her own account, and he provided an example of using a third party approach to do this; ‘Well you have me convinced. Why aren’t xxx buying this?’ While this certainly seems useful, ethical issues may arise from the interviewer claiming to be convinced if they are not, and it might also be problematic from a critical perspective where the
expectation is that the researcher will challenge injustice wherever it is found. Nonetheless, the idea of ‘using a third party as a way of taking the subject away from his own perspective without demonstrating one’s own personal scepticism’ is likely to be a good strategy, and since it is an approach used in everyday conversations by tactful people, is in accordance with the overall conversational tone of elite interviews.

The interviewer’s ability to critique respondent’s accounts is likely to be enhanced if they have a good understanding of the context under discussion. This prevents them from being easily misled (Berry 2002:681; Walford 2011:2), and makes them alert to an interviewee’s confusion or forgetfulness (Gewirtz & Ozga 1994: 195). Background information about the interviewee may be of assistance when judging the accuracy of responses (Dean & Whyte 1970/2006:105). Asking the interviewee questions about other participants or organisations might also be useful in providing information that can be checked against other sources to assess the reliability of the respondent (Berry 2002:681; Dean & Whyte 1970/2006:106). In circumstances where there is a suspicion that the interviewee is exaggerating his/her own role, Berry (2002:681) recommended moving away from the ‘impact questions’ to aspects that the interviewee is less heavily invested in and so might be inclined to answer more honestly. Somewhat similarly, Aberbach and Rockman (2002:675) remarked on how their questions ‘focussed on general views and not information that might jeopardize the respondents’ personal interests’. There are, however, likely to be some crucial questions in every interview that cannot be avoided and it seems worth risking an inaccurate response rather than omitting those crucial questions entirely.

Although not possible in every study, broadening the interview sample away from a narrow construction of the policy elites that were so harshly described by Batteson and Ball (1995:202) may also be a strategy to increase the honesty of responses obtained. Batteson and Ball (1995:202) suggested that what they saw as the ‘non-revealing occupational impulses’ of the traditional policy elite ‘partly stem from the roots of state and government as being the legitimate purveyor of legal, social and political authority’. Therefore, including less ‘elite’ people in the interview sample, where appropriate, may be helpful. In some cases, it will not be possible to broaden the interview sample, and having made all efforts to encourage the interviewee to be truthful and clear, and used their own existing knowledge to evaluate the report obtained; the researcher will have no option but to trust their informant’s accounts. This is true of any research method, however, in that there must always be some doubt and tentativeness about data that has been gleaned through ‘surrogate observers’ (Dexter 1970/2006:22).

Also related to the issue of evaluating the accounts obtained is the difficulty that can arise in distinguishing between organisational, communal or individual responses (Walford 2011:3). This is further complicated by the possibility that the interviewee will provide all types, often without clarifying this, during the same interview. Furthermore, it can never be guaranteed that the individual fully knows, agrees with or is able to accurately express the viewpoint (or multiple viewpoints, Jones
1994:178) of their particular organisation (cf. Conti and O’Neil 2007:78). This was an issue of concern in the present study. It seemed wise, therefore, not to claim that a representative view of the organisation has been obtained, (unless the interviewee has specifically stated they are speaking on behalf of the organisation), rather it can only be claimed that the views of a policy actor/informant have been canvassed. Such a differentiation is arguably less important when looking for discursive patterns than if seeking to make generalisations across organisations.

Whether the interviewee positions themselves as a provider of raw data, or as a provider of an account that contains their own interpretations and conclusions, obviously affects the nature of their contribution (cf. Ball 1994b:103, citing Platt 1981). Given the conversational nature of elite interviews and the skills of the elite interviewees, it is unlikely that many would confine themselves to merely providing factual accounts; indeed, even if this was their intention their statements will always represent their own perceptions (cf. Dean & Whyte 1970/2006:101). Consequently, the interviewer must be conscious of how individual perspectives influence the information provided, although this is assumed when undertaking discourse analysis anyway. Jones’s (1994:184) point that even large and complex organisations derive their characteristics from the qualities and characteristics of people within them perhaps reduces the importance of differentiating between the personal and the organisational somewhat, albeit that Jones acknowledged that his opinion on this was contrary to much prevailing organisational theory.

In the present research, the high level of agreement among the accounts of the various interviewees with regard to the Irish policy-making sphere supports the contention that they were honest and accurate in their responses. While at no time did the researcher feel she was being deliberately deceived by respondents, the research findings do draw attention to instances where an interviewee’s particular take on an issue may be influenced by a desire to show themselves or their organisation in a positive light, e.g. in Section 4.2.4.1 where the INTO respondent’s emphasis on poor parental involvement in the past may be an attempt to highlight the improvements made since, or in Section 4.4.4.3 where the interviewee’s account of improvements in the NPC structure may be associated with her own influence on those changes.

3.4.4.3 Demanding nature of elite interviewing

While all interviewing makes demands on the researcher, it can be argued that elite interviewing tends to be more onerous, as the conversational style of the interview requires more input and alertness from the interviewer than conventional interviews (inter alia Aberbach & Rockman 2002:674; Morrissey 1970/2006:99). Indeed, Berry (2002:679) described interviews based on open-ended questions as ‘a high-wire act’, with the interviewer composing follow up questions ‘on the fly’, and he noted (p 682) that even the most experienced researcher cannot anticipate ‘all the twists and turns’ that such interviews may take. As was observed in Section 3.4.2.2, open-ended questions may also make the interview experience onerous on the interviewee. Among the solutions offered to
ameliorate the challenges of elite interviewing for the researcher, as well as the obvious need to prepare properly, was the possibility of having interviewers work in pairs (cf. Fitz & Halpin 1994:37-38). Since paired interviews were not feasible in the present study, attention was paid to scheduling interviews so as to avoid interviewer fatigue. In order to ensure that the interviews were not too demanding of the interviewee, and in recognition of the interviewees’ busy schedules, the interviewer was careful not to exceed the one hour slot she had asked to be allocated. It proved useful to set an alarm to chime after 45 minutes to ensure that time remained to address any remaining crucial topics before the interview concluded. The interviews ranged in length from thirty-six minutes (IPPN interview) to sixty-one minutes (INTO interview), with the signing of the consent forms and interviewer introductions etc. taking place outside of the recorded times. (See Appendix D for recorded duration of all interviews).

3.4.4.4 Validity and reliability in elite interviewing

Berry (2002) devoted an article to discussing the minimisation of validity and reliability issues in elite interviewing. He was concerned with how the open-ended items and conversational nature of these interviews makes coding and comparison between interviews very difficult. However, Dexter (1970/2006:19) explained how comparison in elite interviewing is different than in standard interviews, as deviation is often handled statistically in the latter, but in the former ‘an exception, a deviation, an unusual interpretation may suggest a revision, a reinterpretation, an extension, a new approach’, as the possibility that only a few people actually know and can articulate how things actually occur is recognised. Therefore, validity and reliability in the quantitative understanding of those concepts are not applicable to the present study, albeit that this does not excuse it from methodological rigour and care.

3.4.4.5 The usefulness of elite interviewing is not undermined by these caveats

Without denying difficulties in the use of elite interviewing as a data collection technique, these challenges are not sufficient to cause its rejection. Walford (2011) concluded that elite interviewing may be no more difficult than other research approaches. He was optimistic that since the powerful are used to having their views listened to they are likely to make good interview subjects; furthermore, they may be inclined to value educational research more than the general public. Aberbach and Rockman (2002:676) were, similarly, optimistic that elite interviews ‘take a lot of persistence, time and whatever passes these days for shoe leather, but they are immense fun’. In the context of the present research the elite interviews provided an insight into Irish educational policy making processes that would not have been accessible if relying on the policy documents alone, as well as greatly widening the framing context within which those documents were analysed.
3.4.5 Ethical issues in elite interviewing

Among the most important ethical concerns in elite interviewing is the degree to which the interviewer should reveal their own opinions and approach to the interviewee and the related concern with assessing how much the positioning of the interviewee might have affected the interviewer’s response. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity when reporting also pertain.

3.4.5.1 Revelation or reservation of interviewer’s opinions

Walford (2011:4, 1994a) described decisions relating to ‘the degree to which the researcher should make clear his or her own views’ to the interviewee as being among the most difficult aspects of elite interviewing. A careful balance needs to be struck between the ethical considerations of not deceiving the interviewee, while at the same time encouraging them to be frank in their responses, and not putting the continuation of the interview at risk by visibly disagreeing with what is being said. Conti (Conti & O’Neil 2007:77) discussed the ‘strategic management’ of his ‘political identity’ during interviews, arising from these concerns. Similarly, Woliver (2002:677) commented that ‘You have to hedge sometimes in order to get an interview. However you cannot mislead people’. Arguably the interviewer’s own entitlement to personal privacy means that this hedging does not contravene ethical considerations. Indeed, there may be an ethical imperative for so doing, as otherwise the interviewee’s knowledge of the researcher’s position may affect their responses and so contaminate the interview, even if Walford (1994a:85) commented ‘Neutrality caused me some severe ethical doubts’. Additionally, avoiding revealing one’s own opinions is prudent from a power relations perspective, given that Mickelson (1994:145) discussed how ‘self-disclosure diminishes one’s power and, arguably, one’s ability to engage the subject seriously on the same critical plane’. Dexter (1970/2006:64) noted that elite interviews are always to some extent covert, as the interviewer him/herself does not know where the interview will lead. Therefore, it seems advisable to fend off questions about hypotheses and findings, at least until the interview is over (Aberbach & Rockman 2002:674). Likewise, it is prudent not to be too specific in explaining what one is looking for to interviewees, with Dexter (1970/2006:50) adamant that a list of questions should not be provided to interviewees prior to the interview for this reason. Arguably it is easier to deflect interviewee interest in the researcher’s opinions and priorities on some topics than others, with discourses of parent-teacher relations, for example, less likely to be of major interest to interviewees than more sensitive topics.

More problematic than ‘hedging’, however, is the pretense of agreeing with an interviewee in order to draw them out and to increase rapport, a ‘temptation’ mentioned by Whitty and Edwards (1994:22) and discussed at length by Walford (1994a:84-86). The issue of how to react if an interviewee expresses views that the interviewer finds abhorrent also arose in Walford’s (1994a:86) work. Mickelson (1994:148) stated that, arising from her interview experiences, she adopted a ‘consciously assertive stance’ when she encountered ‘racist, elitist or reactionary rhetoric’. While
analysts using a critical approach might be expected to challenge their informants in an attempt to reduce injustice and inequality in the world, it can perhaps be also argued that interviewees are themselves entitled to their own opinions and that if they have agreed to share these with the interviewer for research purposes, then they do not deserve to be rebuked for them. Admittedly, this entitlement is conditional on the type of views being expressed, and the interviewer’s tact and diplomacy are likely to be crucial in successfully handling such occurrences. Again this is likely to be most applicable in interviews dealing with controversial or sensitive topics, and was not a significant concern in the present study.

3.4.5.2 Subjectivity and positionality

Even if the interviewer is careful to reserve their own opinions and priorities, and even if they approach the interview with as impartial a perspective as possible, nonetheless, both interviewer and interviewee are likely to ‘read’ each other, albeit unconsciously, and tailor their interactions as a result. ‘The interviewer is both part of the situation and the instrument through which recording takes place’ (Dexter 1970/2006:118); therefore, the questions he/she asks and the way he/she interprets answers is likely to be influenced by his/her own prior experiences, expectations and characteristics. Hence, subjectivity and positionality are important in elite interviewing, as they are in discourse analysis. Positionality is further complicated in the interview situation by the ‘multiple positionalities’ (Sultana 2007:383) resulting from the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee, and the way in which they can serve as a ‘set of stimuli’ (Dexter 1970/2006:120) for the response of the other. A practical example of this was provided by Dean and Whyte (1970/2006:102) when they noted how people in social contexts express their political affiliations differently depending on whether the company they are with shares similar affiliations or not. Such effects are likely to be amplified in the formal setting of the interview.

As well as the somewhat unconscious positionings that occur during interviews based on appearance, background, qualifications or demeanour (cf. Sultana 2007) and that are in many ways inevitable (particularly when it is the interviewer who is being positioned by the interviewee) interview participants may more consciously seek to position themselves in particular ways as well. Dexter (1970/2006:112) discussed how ‘an ingratiation game’ may co-exist with an ‘information giving game’ in interviews, when the interviewee is trying to please the interviewer with the answers they provide. This has obvious consequences for the information provided. Likewise, the tactics that the interviewer employs in the interview are likely to influence the information provided, and so the interviewer must not only be aware of their own chosen tactics, but also try in so far as possible to assess how these might influence the response of the interviewee (Dexter 1970/2006:34). On a related point, the positioning of the research participants can also be affected by the location in which the interview takes place. It is imperative, therefore, that the researcher understands the ‘joint construction’ characteristics of interviews, that an interview ‘is not the unmediated world of others,
but the world between ourselves and the others’ (Hastrup 1992:117, cited by Ball 1994b:97). Heller (2001:139) noted how interviews themselves can be sites of discourse production, as the very act of asking about a particular topic affords it status, as well as which interviewees might be concerned about the ‘narrative legitimacy’ of their accounts in comparison with those of other interviewees. Adequate attention needs to be paid to subjectivity and positionality to ensure that the quality of data obtained from interviews is not compromised, although it is also crucial that such concerns are not allowed to ‘paralyze … scholars’ (Sultana 2007:375), given their unavoidable nature.

During the present study, the researcher tried systematically to understand how positioning occurred, and how this may have impinged on the interview situation. While undoubtedly positioning did have a role, it is unlikely to have been as central a concern as in studies where sensitive issues or cross-cultural research were involved. Also the unique characteristics of elite interviewing may invert the margin/centre analogy that St Louis and Calabrese Barton (2002) used to explain positioning in terms of power relations. On the contrary, the less structured nature of elite interviews may make positionality all the more important, if the conversation that develops is affected by it, in the absence of the discipline of a fixed schedule of questions. In any event, the consequences of positioning in the present study were most apparent in interview situations where the interviewee perceived the interviewer to be an ‘insider’ and spoke to her accordingly, and the researcher had to be particularly careful to try step outside of her insider identity. This of itself was a source of some discomfort to the researcher, as a sense of betrayal and dishonesty was involved in critiquing those contributions given on an almost collegial basis.

3.4.5.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Research interviews generally proceed on the basis of confidentiality and anonymity for ethical reasons. However, the situation is more complicated in elite interviewing, since interviewees are chosen because of who they are and the positions they hold. Therefore, it can be difficult to offer them total anonymity without interfering with the objectives of the research (Walford 2011:4; Gale 2003:65). Arguably the more elite the interview subjects the less confidentiality is an issue, particularly when elected representatives are being interviewed. Evidence of this can be seen in the work of Whitty and Edwards (1994:22) who named politicians and representatives on national bodies, but not civil servants, parents, teachers or pupils. Many of the studies in the literature took this approach of naming top elites (inter alia Kogan 1994; Mickelson 1994; Ball 1990), but some did not, with, for instance, Fitz and Halpin (1994) not naming any respondents, even those government ministers that were happy to be identified. It would appear then that the ethical issues around confidentiality and anonymity in elite interviewing are highly context specific, and must be explicitly negotiated with each interviewee (Jones 1994:183; Phillips 1998). For the present study, the naming of the interviewees did not seem appropriate, both because they were not ‘top’ elites and also due to university regulations, but the total anonymisation of data would have made it worthless. This
dilemma was resolved by agreeing with the interviewees prior to interview that they would be identified in organisational rather than personal terms, e.g. ‘XXX official/respondent’.

Regardless of the elite status of respondents, decency demands that their responses are treated justly. As well as considering issues relating to how the researcher has treated the respondent, Simons’ (2009:107) point that researchers cannot guarantee that those who read the research report will respond fairly and sensitively to what they read, has to be borne in mind. Great caution is required, therefore, when attributing comments to respondents. The glossary of journalistic conventions provided by Goldstein (2002:671) is useful in this regard. While research and journalistic ethics do differ, and the former must take precedence in academic research, nonetheless, this glossary demonstrates the complexity and the range of options associated with confidentiality and anonymity concerns.

3.4.6 Key affordances of elite interviewing, as it is used in this study

As well as ameliorating the weaknesses of relying solely on documentary data sources, elite interviews offer advantages in their own right to research as well. The most important of these benefits include the rich data that can be gathered from interviews and the compatibility of elite interviews and discourse theory.

3.4.6.1 Elite interviews as a source of rich data

Peabody et al. (1990:452) posed the rhetorical question ‘When are interviews an appropriate research strategy? Almost always’. Describing elite interviews as ‘potent’ and high yielding, he explained (p 454); ‘Not only are you able to watch performance first hand – a form of participant observation – but you are able to elicit perceptions and record data about an unfolding and intriguing research topic of your own choice’. It is notable, however, that Dexter (1970/2006:22-29) was quite cautious about the universal applicability of elite interviewing as a data collection method, stating that ‘a study planning a heavy reliance on elite interviews should have a contingency plan…so that if the elite interviews prove basically uninformative some other techniques can be substituted’. Nonetheless, the very existence of his book suggests that he did regard it as an important research method. Since elite interviewing is supplementary to documentary discourse analysis in the present study rather than being the sole means of data collection, this difficulty of uninformative interviews did not arise.

3.4.6.2 Elite interviewing as compatible with and supplementary to discourse analysis

Given that the application of the tools of discourse analysis is the primary research method of this study, it was important that other methods chosen were compatible with discourse theory. As it is a fundamental principle of discourse analysis that the researcher must acknowledge and be open to the variety of interpretations that can be gleaned from a text, elite interviewing adds an important layer to the analysis in that it allows the researcher (as long as the interviewees are carefully chosen) to access
insiders’ perspectives on the text. McCloskey (2008:32, citing Potter & Wetherell 1987, Van Dijk 1997) explained the purposes of interviews in terms of discourse analysis when she stated ‘The purpose of an interview is to learn more about a particular discourse including how and under what conditions it is understood, how it functions and what it accomplishes’. Similarly, Hyatt (2005:521) noted the importance of interviewing specialist informants in order to ‘contextualise the discourse’. The freedom given to interviewees in elite interviewing, allowing them to define relevance and structure their own answers increases the likelihood that the resulting transcripts will be suitable for discourse analysis. This is likely to have a corroborative and additive effect; for instance, both Tansey (2007) and Goldstein (2002:669) noted the potential for elite interviews to inform and guide research that relies primarily on other sources of data. As Tansey (2007:767) stated ‘While documents and other sources may provide detailed accounts, there is often no substitute for talking directly with those involved, and gaining insights from key participants’, thereby accessing what Fitz and Halpin (1994:33) termed the ‘assumptive worlds’ of policy-makers. Furthermore, it appears to be an ideal method through which to widen the framing context in which documents are analysed, and by providing alternative perspectives on documents, assists the researcher in considering the multiple interpretations that a single document may have, thereby reducing the risks of undue researcher subjectivity in the research findings. It also provides an important defence against charges that the researcher’s own discursive background has blinded them to alternative interpretations of the text.

3.4.7 Conclusion to section

Elite interviewing formed the second main research instrument of the research. It both followed on from and supported the documentary discourse analysis, as well as providing additional data (interview transcripts) to which the tools of discourse analysis were applied. While technically challenging, the utility of elite interviewing for the research outweighed its difficulties.

3.5 Chronology of research

The 2009/10 academic year was spent reading journal articles from Irish and international (mainly British and American) sources that related to the broad topic of parental involvement in school management, policy and decision-making. The summer of 2010 was spent drafting a literature review relating to the rationale for advocating parental involvement in schools, and the influences and impediments to that involvement. While this contributed to the overall understanding of the topic, it became apparent as the research progressed that much of this was not directly relevant to the emerging discursive focus of the research.

The second year (2010/11) was spent considering methodological issues, and it was during this time that the research focus changed considerably, with the discursive construction of parent-teacher relations becoming a priority interest. The third term of 10/11 was devoted to exploring the possibilities of discourse analysis as an educational research method, with the summer of 2011 spent
Methodology

synthesising the tools of discourse analysis, advice and approaches from various sources into a framework that could be usefully and efficiently employed when reading documents critically.  

The first attempts at applying the discourse analysis grid to educational policy documents were made in the early part of the third year (2011/12), with the second term of the year spent re-drafting the literature review in light of the discursive focus. The introductory chapter and theoretical and analytical frame sections were also drafted during the third year. Much of the initial documentary discourse analysis was completed during the final term of 11/12 and summer of 2012, although the cyclical and continual nature of this process meant that analysis and re-analysis was ongoing throughout the remainder of the study period.  

During the documentary discourse analysis it became apparent that a thematic analysis was required to focus the discourse analysis on the research questions, and so the first term of 2012/13 was spent thematically analysing the documents, and then completing the first draft of the documentary discourse analysis findings. Methodological issues relating to elite interviewing came to the fore in the second term, which was spent reading a range of literature on elite interviewing. Practical aspects related to elite interviewing, such as identifying and contacting potential interviewees and devising lists of conversation prompts were addressed in the third term of 2012/13. The summer of 2013 was spent drafting the methodology chapter, and reviewing the theoretical and analytical frame chapters.  

The methodology chapter was revised during the early part of the first term of the fifth year of study (2013/14) in light of conversations with the research supervisor. Much of the remainder of 2013/14 was given over to conducting, analysing and writing about the elite interviews (See account of interviews undertaken in Appendix D). Great effort was expended during the final term devising a thesis structure that would allow the research findings to be discussed comprehensively yet concisely. The analytical chapter was drafted during the summer of 2014. The list of references, which had been compiled on an ongoing basis, was checked and standardised during that summer also.  

The early part of the first term of 2014/15 was spent completing the analytical and final chapters. The chapter discussing lessons from the field was also written at this stage. A review of the most recent literature was undertaken to ensure that the references were current. The second part of that term was spent reviewing and proof-reading the complete thesis and attending to matters such as the table of contents, appendices and abstract, in preparation for submission.

3.6 Summary of research approach  

The research reported in this thesis was rooted in a Foucauldian discourse analysis approach, with both documentary and interview components. It involved a critical reading of Irish educational policy documents with regard to three potential discourses of parent-teacher relations (traditional, managerial and democratic), and the use of elite interviews with key policy actors to further explore these discourses. As well as providing a wider framing context for the documentary analysis, the interview transcripts themselves served as texts for analysis. The discourse analysis of both the policy
documents and the testimony of policy actors allowed for a discursive account of parent-teacher relations in Irish education to be written, presenting one interpretation of how the different discourses in operation may influence and be influencing the policy and practice of parental involvement in Irish schools, as well as illuminating the relationships and connections between policy influencers, policy texts and practice in Irish education more broadly.

The following chapter discusses the findings of the documentary discourse analysis and elite interview stages of the research, in the context of traditional, managerial and democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations.
4. Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

4.1 Introduction to chapter

In order to ensure that the discourse analysis undertaken remained relevant to the research objectives, and influenced by the literature reviewed, a thematic approach to discourse analysis was adopted. As part of this process, three aspects of parent-teacher relationships/parental involvement in education were identified (the justification provided for parental involvement in schools, the presentation of power relations between parents and teachers, the implementation assumptions relating to parental involvement). The characteristic features of each of these aspects provided useful headings under which traditional, managerial or democratic constructions of parent-teacher relationships could be described.

It is, of course, difficult to precisely delineate each of the above aspects of parent-teacher relationships, and there is potential overlap between some of the categories, as well as overlap between the various discursive constructions. Nevertheless, this approach offers the potential for a nuanced discussion of the documents analysed. It acknowledges that discourse is by its nature entangled, messy and complicated. Consequently, it should be a more helpful analytical approach than attempting to examine entire documents in terms of only one set of discursive assumptions. Also, rather than considering documents in isolation, the model employed provides for a discourse-wide form of analysis. This allows for a more detailed consideration of the discursive dissonance and similarities that exist within and between the influential documents, and accordingly may allow for the identification of the most salient issues affecting parent-teacher relationships in Irish education. As with any discourse analysis, the conclusions drawn are subjective and in many cases tentative, and always open to further and newer interpretations.

The resulting analytical model is detailed below in table 3. It is on the basis of this model that the documentary analysis in this chapter proceeds.
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of traditional understandings of parent-teacher relations:</th>
<th>Justification for parental involvement</th>
<th>Power relations (knowledge)</th>
<th>Implementation assumptions regarding parental involvement:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Home/school/community as separate spheres of learning, parents delegate educational responsibility to school, supply school ready children. *Protection of teacher professionalism *Fundraising *Parent education, compensatory model</td>
<td>*Teachers powerful, parents less powerful *‘Teacher-as-expert’ – teacher information most important *Distanced relationships -parents as outsiders, (professional boundary issues) *‘Safe’/teacher controlled parental involvement may be allowed</td>
<td>*Fortress’ approach to community *Limited formal structures deemed adequate (‘Rubber stamping’ role for parent reps) *Teacher/principal the main decision makers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Features of managerial understandings of parent-teacher relations: | *School-centric, home to be more like school *Parental involvement as instrument for raising attainment, parents as agents of school objectives *Teachers accountable to parents, parents as monitors, agents of the state *Financial efficiencies | *Parent empowerment in opposition to teacher power, *Challenge to expertise of teachers, teacher as semi-professional/technocrat *Strong parent education model, deficit model, parental accountability to teachers *Public relations, seeking alignment with powerful interests, market models of schooling *Parents’ rights agenda | *De-centralisation – site-based management *Re-centralisation – legislative approaches, measurable and visible involvement *Individualised approach *Adversarial democracy, majority concerns priority, poor representativeness |

| Features of democratic understandings of parent-teacher relations: | *Continuity between home/school/community learning environments, Joint endeavour for education of child *Holistic benefits to child *Contributes to teacher professionalism *Aligns school more closely with local community *Political justifications | *Responsive accountability, mutual responsibility towards the other, high trust, dual empowerment *Complementary knowledge of parents, possibility of mutual learning *Parents’ rights agenda | *Wide forms of involvement to ensure maximum participation *Interest in ensuring representativeness, concern for minority issues, deliberative forms of democracy *Genuine commitment required from all – bottom-up as well as top-down *Importance of interpersonal relations, emotional realm |

Table 3. Thematic analysis model.
At its most fundamental the analysis revolves around three concepts; Traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations, Managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations and Democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. Each is now explored in turn with reference to the documentary discourse analysis and the elite interviews undertaken.

4.2 Traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations in the discourse sources analysed

The traditional construction of parent-teacher relations presented in Chapter 2 suggests a view of the school and the home as separate spheres of learning, with parents delegating educational responsibility to the school. Parental involvement in education is justified in limited terms with regard to the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children are ready for school, both in terms of their psychological readiness, and in having the materials and resources that the school requires. Issues relating to discipline and welfare are likely to be regarded as part of the parents’ remit, and contact between school and home is primarily based on these aspects, often only when problems arise. This understanding of a marginal role for parents in schools serves to position teachers as the more powerful in the parent-teacher relationship. Both the institutional weight of the school and their expert knowledge provides teachers with a source of power that is to be guarded zealously. Parents, by contrast, are seen as possessors of inferior knowledge, as relatively powerless, both collectively and individually, and so have little choice but to trust teachers. Parent and teacher power is often conceptualised as inverse to the other. In the face of greater demands for parental involvement, teachers influenced by traditional understandings seek to protect their control over the relationship by allowing ‘safe’ parental involvement that does not interfere with the professional domain of the teacher. If traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations are characterised by distant and limited relationships, then the implementation of parental involvement in schools is likely to be regarded as unimportant. Mandatory structures for parental involvement lead only to limited forms of democracy, with the principal and teachers remaining the major decision makers in the school, and parent representatives having merely a ‘rubber stamping’ role. (cf. inter alia Epstein 1986; Dom & Verhoeven 2006; Bauch & Goldring 1998).

During the course of the research most of the documents analysed and all of the informants interviewed took a broader view of the purposes of parental involvement than that characteristic of the traditional model. This is unsurprising given that any document that addresses the topic of parental involvement in education is likely to be going beyond traditional constructions of parental involvement, given its very existence. Similarly, since stating that parents should be excluded from participation in their children’s education is now outside the discursive limits of schooling and parenting, it would be difficult to find any interviewee who would openly subscribe to traditional models of parent-teacher relations. Despite the apparent rejection of traditional constructions at overt
levels, however, a critical analysis pointed to the continuing underlying influence of traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations in Irish education; hence, they are worthy of examination here.

4.2.1 Traditional justifications for (lack of) parental involvement in schools/education in the documents analysed

4.2.1.1 ‘Separate spheres’ approach to home/school/community

The notion that the home and the school are separate spheres of influence, justifying very limited parental involvement in the school, was not found widely across the documents and, indeed, it is not openly stated anywhere. However, arguably a sense of this understanding of the relationship of the home and the school can be found in Statement of Strategy 2011-2014 (DES 2011) and Commission Staff Working Paper, Schools for the 21st Century (Commission of the European Communities 2007) and more tentatively in the foreword of Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) and Primary School Curriculum Introduction (DES/NCCA 1999). None of the documents analysed, even those that seem to contain a degree of a delegation model, discuss parental involvement in the limited terms of parents only supplying material and practical resources. Based on the documents analysed then, this justification for limiting parental involvement appears obsolete in the discourse. This may relate to the discursive limits, as it would be difficult for any document addressing parental involvement to argue that parents should only be involved in their children’s education to the extent of ensuring they are properly resourced for school.

While a school-based focus in a document of the Department of Education is understandable given the role of that department in relation to schools, nevertheless it is interesting that the definition of ‘education’ in use throughout Statement of Strategy 2011-2014 is entirely school-based. It can be argued, therefore, that the home and the school are regarded as separate spheres in the document, as more attention is paid to transporting children between home and school than to building home-school relationships in the list of commitments of the DES for the three year period under discussion (p7). The only direct reference to ‘home’ in the document refers to the provision of broadband internet services (p5), albeit that reference raises the possibility of the home being obliquely categorised with ‘schools and other education providers’ as the provision of broadband is to allow them ‘to take full advantage of online education services and digital content’. Even if homes are understood to be included among ‘other education providers’ there is no sense that continuity between the home and school in terms of the use of technology in education is envisaged, however. Such a separate sphere approach would seem to be in accordance with traditional understandings of parent-teacher relations, and requires little attention to be paid to parental involvement in schools.

An initial reading of Schools for the 21st Century suggested that the school and home are regarded in the text as being in harmony with each other. The document acknowledges the ‘key roles’
of parents with regard to the education of their children, and states that the school is complementary to parents;

‘School is the place where the majority of Europeans spend at least nine or ten years of their lives; here they gain the basic knowledge, skills and competences, and many of the fundamental norms, attitudes and values which will carry them through their lives. Complementing the key roles of parents, school can help individuals develop their talents and fulfil their potential for personal growth (both emotional and intellectual) and well-being’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2007:3).

However, on closer examination the structure of these sentences, where the school rather than the parent is the active subject, and the importance of the school is discussed first, seems to construct the school as the more important in educational terms. Furthermore, the ‘key roles’ of parents seem to be associated with talents, personal growth and well-being. Important as these attributes are, the educationally serious business of knowledge, skills, competences, norms, attitudes and values are linked to the school rather than the home in the text. The reference to the key role of parents in located in the middle of a paragraph which discusses the importance of schools, which may serve to downplay the importance attached to the role of parents, despite its description as ‘key’. It is possible to argue, therefore, that a ‘separate spheres’ approach to home and school is being taken in this document, where parents attend primarily to personal growth and well-being issues, delegating educational responsibility to the school.

The emphasis on the need for ‘high-quality pre-school programmes that focus on learning as well as personal and social competences’ (p4) in Schools for the 21st Century, also serves to highlight the role of the school over that of the parents. It implies that developing personal and social competences (traditionally part of the remit of the family of the pre-school child) is not adequate and that ‘learning’ (presumably of an academic nature) should be taking place. Similarly, the school is construed as providing solutions to the challenges caused by circumstances such as educational disadvantage, migrant families and ‘single parent and working families’, which is a quite strongly school-centric reaction to ‘responding to challenges in our societies’. The document does admit that schools can never tackle wider social problems alone, and that action is required in other policy fields as well, but within the document priority is given to school-based initiatives. While a school-centric approach is often typical of managerial approaches to parental involvement, it is notable that in this document there is no attempt to suggest that the home should be more like the school, rather it is the school that will educate in preparation for the twenty first century. This implies that parents delegate educational responsibility to the school, and so is in keeping with traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations.

Arguably the first paragraph of the foreword of Possibilities for Partnership incorporates a delegation model in its definition of educational partnership; ‘The State and school management authorities ensure that qualified teachers are appointed to educate the child and parents entrust teachers
to do this. This defines the educational partnership’ (p ii). However, notwithstanding this point, the rest of the document places great emphasis on the need for education to be acknowledged as involving joint endeavour between the home and the school, in accordance with democratic justifications for parental involvement. Since it seems possible that different discursive principles may underlie the foreword than the main body of text, care is needed not to place undue emphasis on the content of the foreword, therefore. This sense that two conflicting discursive strands are present in the one document is notable of itself, however, demonstrating the complex nature of discourse.

Given that Primary School Curriculum Introduction specifically addresses learning in school and its main audience is teachers, it is unsurprising that its focus should be on the role of the school in children’s learning. Traditional assumptions cannot be inferred from its school-centric focus. Notwithstanding this point, however, it is notable that no mention is made of parents or parental involvement in the ‘Principles of the Curriculum’ section of the document, and while ‘partnership in education’ is listed among the ‘Key issues in primary education’, this pertains more to the partnership involved in the preparation of the curriculum than to school level partnerships. Some degree of a traditional positioning of the home and the school seems likely, therefore, even if the ‘role of parents’ section espouses parental involvement in a democratic sense.

That the notion of the home and school being separate spheres of influence is absent from the majority of the documents analysed is important in indicating the demise of openly traditional approaches to parent-teacher relations. Nonetheless, that this separate spheres strand of discourse was identified, albeit tentatively, in both DES and INTO documents is likely to have implications for parent-teacher relations in Irish education, given the influential role of both of those organisations. That this discursive strand was potentially present in a European document is also notable, given the increasingly importance of European influences in Irish education.

4.2.1.2 Protection of teacher professionalism

Of the documents analysed only Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) includes a lengthy discussion of teacher professionalism in the context of parental involvement in schools. Reference is made to research carried out by the INTO as well as to international research studies. The linking of parental involvement and teacher professionalism in this way makes it a particularly interesting document given the concern of the current study in making similar connections. Although at overt levels Possibilities for Partnership recommends parental involvement as a way of enhancing teacher professionalism, a critical reading of the document suggested that the protection of teacher professionalism in the face of greater parental involvement is an underlying theme. This indicates that traditional justifications for limiting or controlling parental involvement are present in the document.

As discussed in Section 2.4.3.3, making a connection between teacher professionalism and parental involvement can be characteristic of democratic approaches to teacher professionalism, where
a willingness to engage with parents is a crucial part of a professional teacher’s role. An initial reading of *Possibilities for Partnership*, therefore, infers a democratic approach to parent-teacher relations. However, the somewhat self-interested nature of the argument relating to professionalism presented in the document is more typical of traditional approaches to parent-teacher relationships, where the powerful professional seeks to preserve their own status. The final sentence of the second chapter; ‘Far from diminishing the work of teachers well-planned programmes of parental involvement will enhance teacher professionalism through the achievement of improvements in the life of schools and in the quality of education offered to our pupils’ (INTO 1997:20), refers to the benefits obtained by pupils from greater parental involvement, but arguably the structuring of that sentence, with the enhancement of teacher professionalism located before enhancing educational quality, privileges the enhancement of professional status over other concerns.

A self-interested justification for greater parental involvement is also evident in the understanding of *Possibilities for Partnership* that parental involvement in schools will increase the respect with which teachers are held, by allowing parents to see the dedication and skill of teachers first-hand (p iii). Similarly, partnerships are promoted as a way of sharing blame for educational failure with parents, rather than teachers having to ‘shoulder total responsibility’ (p19), which again prioritises the professional reputation of teaching. The latter argument is made very strongly, as terms such as ‘shoulder’, ‘fool-hardy’ and ‘sharper focus’ indicate. Indeed, the inclusion of ‘fool-hardy’ (citing Burke 1992) may have the effect of a disciplinary technique, in that no teacher is likely to want to be considered a ‘fool’ for not engaging with parents. Notwithstanding the legitimacy of these status related concerns, and the function of the INTO as a trade union to protect ‘the precious asset’ (p17) of teachers’ public standing, the interest in professional status seems to be more the concern of a self-interested profession than that of an activist one. Hence, in this document the recognition of shared responsibility for the education of children seems, paradoxically, to be in keeping with traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations.

Furthermore, despite its advancement of parental involvement on the grounds that it contributes to teacher professionalism, a wariness about the effects of greater parental involvement on teacher professional status is apparent throughout *Possibilities for Partnership*. For instance, it states, ‘Yet fears remain that increasing parental involvement in schools particularly to the point of partnership and the involvement of parents in the classroom constitute a threat to professional status and even professional competence….. Partnership has not been proclaimed with the medical professional…or with the legal professional…’ (INTO 1997: 17).

This caveat is placed in the middle of the section discussing the relationship between teacher professionalism and parental involvement, where arguably it is more effective in breaking up the text than if it had been placed at the end or in a clearly marked counter-arguments section. The use of the passive voice in structuring this counter argument is interesting as it allows the INTO to distance
themselves from a position that is contrary to the partnership approach that the title of the booklet would suggest the INTO are promoting. Indeed, the direct attribution of the connection between partnership and teacher professionalism to Macbeth (directly referenced eleven times in the second chapter) may serve to distance the INTO from that partnership argument itself. In contrast other points are raised without the attribution being so distinct (cf. p13, 16). Admittedly Warnock’s call for ‘confidently authoritative’ (p 19, 20) teachers is also fully attributed by means of two relatively long quotations, so a desire to include a broad range of perspectives to satisfy its membership may be influential in how the arguments are structured. Nonetheless, the mitigator ‘some degree’, in the phrase ‘a structured educational partnership is to some degree central to the concept of the teacher as a professional’ (p12) is notable due to the way it weakens the argument for partnership. Also noteworthy is the mitigation implied in the use of the phrase ‘ideal of partnerships’ (p18) that teachers are to foster, when using the word ‘partnership’ by itself would have been a more direct alternative. A similar hesitancy may be found in the statement that teachers must ‘take the initiative in organising collaboration with parents’ (p19) rather than directly ‘collaborating’ with them. Moreover, the frequent use of ‘positive’ (c. 12 times) to qualify parent-teacher relations indicates an awareness, if not a preoccupation with the possibility of negative, difficult relationships, while the reference to ‘potential benefits’ of partnership offers no certainty that benefits will accrue from it. The caution regarding parental involvement throughout the document suggests that traditional constructions are strongly influencing the view taken of parent-teacher relationships.

There is a very direct rejection of the managerial approach to parent-teacher relations in the second chapter of Possibilities for Partnership, particularly of the type to be found in the UK education system. The manner of this rejection is interesting, however, as it is achieved through the inclusion of a quote from Warnock (1985); ‘Schools cannot and should not be run on the lines of a consumer service…Even though educating the child is a joint exercise, parents should realise that they cannot have the last word. It is a question of collaboration, not partnership…’ (p19). Reference is made to the need for ‘an authoritative response based on expertise’ from teachers to parents. Arguably this involves a comparison of traditional and managerial approaches to parents, rather than of democratic and managerial approaches. As a result the traditional model of the distanced professional in control of relationships within his/her bounded territory appears to be the safest option for teachers concerned about their relationships with parents, even if the apparent claim of the document is to recommend alternative approaches.

The contention of Possibilities for Partnership that parental involvement in education can be a means to enhance teacher professionalism is, at face value, in accordance with democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. Paradoxically, however, the reasoning behind this contention seems grounded in traditional assumptions. Given the central role of the INTO in terms of influencing the opinions and actions of Irish primary teachers, such traditional assumptions are significant.
4.2.1.3 Fundraising

It appears likely that advocating for parental involvement solely on the grounds of fundraising is now outside of the discursive limits, as none of the documents provide it as a rationale for parental involvement. Nonetheless, the references to fundraising in *Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997) demonstrate that it remains relevant to parental involvement in schools. *Possibilities for Partnership* makes an attempt to relegate the fundraising justification of parental involvement to the past, while at the same time blaming government funding issues for its continuation as a justification for parental involvement (p 119). However, seven of the ten submissions on school experiences of parental involvement included in the document mention fundraising as an important activity of Parents’ Associations. This indicates that fundraising remains (or at least remained in 1997) a central feature of parent-teacher relations in Irish primary schools, whether due to financial necessity or due to discursive assumptions about appropriate roles for parents. By describing how parents having to make up for the ‘gross shortfall in funding for primary schools’ can place ‘a drain on parental goodwill’ the document is not promoting fundraising as a justification for parental involvement, albeit that this may relate more to the INTO’s priorities with regard to school funding than to parental involvement *per se*. Nonetheless, it is obvious from the document that fundraising is still an important component of parental involvement in schools, and so that this traditional justification remains relevant.

Perhaps some degree of a gulf between school level realities and national level approaches to parental involvement, despite the INTO’s close association with and advocacy for teachers in schools, can be identified in the recurrence of fundraising in the school submissions. The inclusion of a sample of these submissions in the document is an interesting discursive strategy, in that it allows school level practicalities to be presented and school-level voices to be heard (containing varied practices of parental involvement) while at the same time allowing the INTO to distance itself from the idea that parental involvement should be limited to fundraising initiatives.

4.2.1.4 Parent education, compensatory model

The emphasis on parent education that was identified in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* (NCCA 2009) and *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES 2011) owes much to the compensatory model from which an interest in parental involvement initially arose. Given the centrality of parent education to both documents (especially *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners*), however, it is more appropriate to discuss these aspects of the documents with regard to their managerial assumptions, as is done in Section 4.3.2.3. The parent education models apparent in *Parental Involvement: Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997) and *Education for Tomorrow* (NPC-P 2010) are discussed with reference to safe involvement in Section 4.2.2.4 below, as they do not contain strong compensatory models of parental involvement.
4.2.2 Traditional presentations of parent-teacher power relations in the documents analysed

4.2.2.1 Teachers powerful, parents less powerful

As noted in Section 2.2, an interest in maintaining teacher power in the parent-teacher relationship is often characteristic of traditional approaches to parental involvement. This concern is not a strong feature of most of the documents analysed. However, a concern with teacher power can be identified in *Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997). Admittedly it is reasonable that a document written by a teacher representative organisation is more likely to be concerned with this issue than those produced by other organisations but, nonetheless, traditional assumptions seem influential.

*Possibilities for Partnership* makes no reference to parent empowerment nor does it call for major changes in the way parents and teachers interact, suggesting that the status quo of parent-teacher relations is deemed satisfactory. It is likely that the status quo of parent-teacher relations, at least in 1997, arose from traditional assumptions of parent-teacher relations, where teachers exercised most power. A powerful positioning of teachers is found in the use of the quotation by Warnock (p 20) that describes how teachers are used to being authoritative over pupils but need to be authoritative with parents, as this is ‘what expertise and conscious professionalism entails’. This quotation is followed immediately by the qualification:

‘A claim for professional recognition by teachers must be based not on a concept of “teacher control” which will generate or be matched by an opposing force of “parent power” but on a commitment to seeking genuine partnerships between parents and schools’ (INTO 1997:20).

This positioning of ‘parent power’ as being in opposition to ‘teacher control’ is typical of traditional or managerial approaches. Similarly, while it is not clear whether the stipulation; ‘Parents’ Associations should not be viewed as a vehicle for parent power’ (p75) is a reassurance for teachers or a warning to parents, it implies that parent power is not a good thing. The metaphor of ‘vehicle’ posits parental power in forceful, dynamic terms that may be threatening to teachers. Additionally the reference to Wolfendale who ‘remarked that increased parental involvement in schools will inevitably attract some parents whose motivation may be rooted in a selfish or anti-social stance’ (p21) in a paragraph discussing the need for a ‘note of caution’ in relation to parental involvement indicates that parent power is viewed as potentially damaging for teachers. Hence, an interest in maintaining teacher power in the relationship with parents can be inferred from the document, in accordance with traditional concerns.

As well as its interest in teacher power in school level relationships, *Possibilities for Partnership* also seeks to position the INTO in a powerful position in national policy-making terms. This power is implied in the use of strong terminology such as ‘the INTO demands’ (pp. 114, 121), and the diverse and wide ranging nature of its proposals. It is obvious from this document that the
INTO regards itself as an educational partner, capable of negotiation with the Department of Education, and resistance to having ‘proclamations of partnership’ (p 159) foisted upon teachers. Parent representative bodies, especially the NPC-P, are recognised in the document (p75), but by advocating on behalf of the NPC-P in relation to maintaining its government funding (p113), the document reveals a power imbalance between the two organisations, in that the INTO, funded by its members, is not as vulnerable to government funding decisions as is the NPC-P. It may also be an attempt to demonstrate affinity with the NPC-P and its concerns, and so to cultivate good relationships at national level.

Other aspects of the INTO’s agenda that are tangential to the topic of parent-teacher relations intrude into Possibilities for Partnership in places (e.g. school accommodation, funding, teacher education). This may suggest a construction of parent-teacher relationships where teachers are in control, as the ability to manipulate what is considered relevant to any particular topic implies a significant level of power. The addition of extraneous issues may also indicate that less importance is attached to parent-teacher relations than a booklet devoted to the topic would initially suggest, and is, therefore, a very interesting discursive strategy. Any down-playing of parental involvement would seem to be in accordance with traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations.

The interest in a powerful position for teachers (both at school level and nationally) that is discernable throughout Possibilities for Partnership seems to be in accordance with traditional constructions of parental involvement. Given the influential position of the INTO in Irish education this seems likely to hinder the development of democratic approaches to parent-teacher relations. Notwithstanding this point, however, it may be that the concerns of teachers about parental involvement were such in 1997 that reassuring them that they would not be disempowered as a result of greater parental involvement in schools was essential if there was ever to be a progression from traditional approaches. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, the interest in maintaining teacher power may be as much a reaction to managerial discourses of parent-teacher relations (where teachers are disempowered) as a rejection of democratic ones.

4.2.2.2 Teacher-as-expert

The notion of the ‘teacher-as-expert’ that is a feature of traditional approaches to parent-teacher relations, can be inferred most strongly from Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997). Again it is to be expected that a teachers’ representative body would be more likely to hold this position than other bodies. Interestingly, a degree of teacher-as-expert model is found in Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010) despite its over-riding interest in parent empowerment. Some sense of a teacher-as-expert model was tentatively inferred from Primary School Curriculum Introduction (DES/NCCA 1999).

The assumption that parents would not know how to support their children’s education in the absence of advice from teachers is discernible from the ‘compelling reasons’ provided as to why
teachers should engage with parental involvement in *Possibilities for Partnership* (p111). Admittedly this is a reasonable theme given the education and practice of teachers as educational experts in their classroom, as well as being understandable given the INTO authorship of the document. Nevertheless, it can be contended that it positions parent knowledge as inferior to that of the professional teacher. The parent-teacher relationship is, therefore, constructed as one where the expert teacher ‘has a professional obligation to communicate and make clear these issues to parents’ (p111). This suggests a traditional construction of parent-teacher power relations.

*Possibilities for Partnership* seems concerned with the maintenance of the reputation of teachers as professional experts in the face of greater parental involvement in education. Professional insecurity can be detected in this assumption that the protection of specialised knowledge domains is necessary to protect teacher professional status. This point is illustrated with reference to the beginning of the section on paired reading, where teachers are reassured that paired reading initiatives do not attempt ‘to teach parents HOW to teach reading’ … but ‘show how parents can provide experiences which enable the child to develop towards reading’ (p82). The stress laid on ‘how’ by the use of capital letters implies that teaching parents to actually teach reading would be an unacceptable encroachment on the professional knowledge-base of the teacher. Although this may indicate an understanding of the difficulties created by giving parents tasks that are pedagogically complex, as Edwards and Warin (1990:330) described, it seems more likely that the careful differentiation of the roles of teacher and parent are associated with a desire to protect professional status in the face of greater parental involvement.

Despite the recurrence of the concern with teacher power and expertise, it is important to note that the positioning of parents as having inferior knowledge is not consistent throughout *Possibilities for Partnership*. For instance, the final chapter acknowledges that parents as a group have a range of talents, abilities and skills that have the potential to enrich and extend the educational opportunities provided by the school’ (p116). The possibility for two-way information sharing is discussed in the third chapter, where information sharing in relation to homework, assessment, record-keeping and parent-teacher meetings is detailed in terms of ‘opportunities for progress that exists’ (p21). The repeating of the NPC-P’s 1991 proposal that schools send out reports that parents can comment on (p30) seems more in line with democratic understandings of the parent-teacher relationship than traditional ones. Similarly, the discussion of parent-teacher meetings is interesting (p34), as it raises the possibility that parents might benefit from contributing to the agenda of the meetings. Notwithstanding the degree of openness to these democratic approaches, however, the note of caution in relation to parental involvement that is evident throughout the document is also present in this section. Indeed, by the end of the paragraph on parent-teacher meetings, the traditional approach has come to the fore again, in that the conclusion made is that parents expect teachers to take the initiative and ‘it makes sense’ that teachers plan the meetings. The structuring of the argument as an appeal to common sense is likely to make it more difficult to challenge, and is an interesting discursive strategy.
A somewhat less traditional construction of parent and teacher knowledge in Possibilities for Partnership is suggested by the extensive quoting of the work of the NPC-P (about homework and reporting to parents, pp. 23-30) and by the reference made to the EPA’s views on homework. This inter-textuality acknowledges the contribution of parent groups to certain aspects of education. It may indicate to teachers that parent requirements are not unreasonable and, therefore, encourage teachers to be more welcoming of parental involvement, as well as recognising the value of parent knowledge to education. However, since issues such as homework and reporting to parents are aspects of education that are traditionally in the domain of the parent anyway, the quoting of the NPC-P and EPA in this area may not provide all that much of a challenge to traditional constructions of parent-teacher relationships.

Despite the apparent challenge to notions to teacher expertise that are present in Education for Tomorrow, (discussed later in Section 4.3.2.2) some of the comments in it serve to reinforce the teacher-as-expert model as well. For instance, teachers are given a central role in the definition of education that underpins the document. It places great emphasis on the responsibility of the school and its teachers to provide parents with information on a variety of aspects of education and school life. Most of the information specified is of an everyday rather than highly pedagogical variety, such as information on a ‘typical school day’ (p17) or ‘the value of homework’ (p20). Communication between home and school is primarily envisaged as occurring in a school to home direction, rather than vice versa, thereby prioritising the knowledge and expertise of the teacher over that of the parent. This suggests a traditional understanding of the teacher-as-expert, even though in many ways this contradicts the dominant discourse of the document which is centred on parent empowerment. Such inter-discursivity is notable, in that it indicates the resilience of traditional discourses despite the strong presence of a competing discourse, and provides a good example of the complexity and inter-tangled nature of discursive work.

The section addressing the role of parents in Primary School Curriculum Introduction appears to be in accordance with democratic discourses of the parent-teacher relationship. However, the sentence ‘To encourage this spirit, schools need to reach out to help some parents overcome any inhibiting attitudes they may have’ is notable with regard to traditional perspectives. By charging teachers/schools with identifying and surmounting ‘inhibiting attitudes’, it positions them as the expert in the relationship. It highlights the generosity of the school and its teachers in ‘helping’ parents, in keeping with traditional approaches to the parent-teacher relationship. That ‘some’ parents need this help suggests deficit approaches. Notably also, the blame for the non-involvement of parents is firmly assigned to parents by this sentence, as it is parental attitudes that are problematised. Admittedly, however, this is only one sentence in an otherwise democratic description of parent-teacher relations; therefore; care needs to be taken not to ascribe too much importance to it.

Arguably the issue of how teachers’ sense of themselves as educational experts is affected by the notion of greater parental involvement in schools is a crucial challenge to the development of
democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. That both parents and teachers take the expertise of teachers for granted can be inferred from the presence of the teacher-as-expert model in both the INTO and the NPC-P publications. Given its importance, it is interesting that this tension is not a theme found more widely in the documents analysed, but perhaps this is due to those documents failing to consider parent-teacher relations from the perspective of teacher professionalism and identity, rather than a resolution of how the teacher-as-expert model can be reconciled with notions of parental involvement in schools.

4.2.2.3 Distanced relationships between parents and teachers

A sense that parents are positioned as ‘outsiders’ to the school, and subject to school actions can be inferred from *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES 2011). While most of *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* (NCCA 2009) is concerned with developing close relationships between parents and practitioners, it is tentatively contended that more distanced relationships are apparent in its discussion of primary school settings. *Sixteen Quality Indicators* (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture May 2000) is open about the possible exclusion of parents from certain aspects of schools, while specifying the limits of parental roles is also a feature of *Supporting Each Other* (NPC-P & IPPN 2010), albeit this may be part of the function of that document. A covert distancing of parents, despite its professed objectives, can be identified in *Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997).

The emphasis of the chapter ‘Enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development’ in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* is firmly on the actions that teachers and schools should take to enable parents to support the education of their own children. Although this ‘enabling’ of parents is to occur through valuing, welcoming, helping, providing, and encouraging them in various ways (p23), all of which actions might be in accordance with democratic approaches, despite this it does not pose much of a challenge to the traditional idea of the distanced professional. Parent-teacher relationships are envisaged from the perspective of the professional throughout. ‘Parents’ Associations’ are listed among those who have responsibility for ‘building effective working relationships’ (p23) but, interestingly, ‘parents’ as a general category are not. This construes the typical parent as an ‘outsider’ to whom the actions of the plan are to be applied, rather than as a participant within the school. The term ‘effective working relationships’ is arguably a more limited vision of parent-teacher relationships than ‘partnership’. Indeed, the term ‘partnership’ is only used three times in this third chapter of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, and appears to be used interchangeably with ‘working together’, ‘involvement’, ‘engagement’, rather than to denote a particular type of parent-teacher relationship. It should be acknowledged though that the omission of the term may have been in recognition of the ‘educational cliché’ (MacGiollaPhádraig 2005:101) that ‘partnership’ has become, rather than being an evaluation of particular types of parent-teacher relationships. Also, although the backgrounding of parent-teacher relations may be indicative of
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

traditional approaches, it is necessary to note that the focus of the document is on literacy and numeracy acquisition rather than on parent-teacher relationships, and this might, likewise, account for the omission of a more detailed discussion of parental involvement. Nevertheless, the document does not appear to contain a serious challenge to traditional approaches to parent-teacher relations.

As discussed in Section 4.4.2.1, much of Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners is premised on the building of close relationships between parents and early childhood care practitioners, in which parents are firmly located as ‘insiders’ in the settings. Interestingly, however, the positioning of parents as ‘insiders’ may not be quite so strong when primary schools are being discussed, if the modes of address used are significant. In most of the ‘Learning Experiences’ first name terms are used for parents and practitioners alike, and this is in keeping with the friendly, chatty tone of the document. However, the teachers in the primary school examples are referred to by their formal titles, Ms or Miss. While this may merely be reflecting the custom in most Irish schools by which teachers are addressed thus, it may also imply a certain distance between parents and teachers. This possibility appears particularly relevant in ‘Learning Experience 3’ (p12) where the classroom teacher was referred to as ‘Ms Nugent’ whereas the Liaison co-ordinator (despite most likely being a primary school teacher also) was referred to as ‘Betty’; hence suggesting a more formal parent-teacher than parent liaison-teacher relationship. It is suggested, therefore, that traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations may continue to constrain partnerships in primary schools in ways that are not as relevant to other early childhood education settings.

Although parent participation is included among the Sixteen Quality Indicators of school education, it is notable that the second ‘key policy’ issue of this indicator is ‘In what respects might policy-makers wish to limit parental involvement as well as to increase them?’ (p45). This interest in limiting parental consultation and decision-making to where it might be ‘most relevant and useful’ echoes the cautious approach to parents that is characteristic of traditional perspectives on parent power. It implies that parental involvement should be carefully weighed up rather than automatically assumed to be ‘a good thing’ (p45). The document also states that ‘the majority of parents will not be motivated to become involved at that macro level of school policy/practice’ (p45). This suggests the underlying influence of traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations, even if the inclusion of ‘parent participation’ among the indicators seems to challenge traditional approaches.

Supporting Each Other is clearly concerned with fostering relationships of high trust between principals and Parents’ Associations. For instance, the statement ‘when misunderstandings occur it is rarely through lack of goodwill from either party…’ (p4) demonstrates a concern with portraying relationships as positively as possible. The euphemism of ‘misunderstandings’ is notable. Arguably traditional undertones of low trust and power struggles underlie this positive approach, however. The emphasis in the document on the importance of Parents’ Associations having clear procedures, especially in relation to financial matters, recognises the possibility of parent-teacher conflict. Reference is made to the rights of parents to have access to a complaints and appeals procedure (p8)
but the notion of teacher accountability to parents is not a feature of the document. The question, ‘In what areas of school life may a Parent Association be involved?’ (p10) presupposes that there are some areas in which Parent Associations should not be involved. The document explicitly states that issues such as professional competence are the responsibility of other than the Parent Association, such as the Board of Management or Inspectorate, and parent members of the Board of Management are reminded that they have no function in bringing individual parent complaints to the Board (p5). Without denying the reasonable nature of this advice, bounding the role of parents in the school is portrayed as a means to avoid parent-teacher conflict, which is a traditionally inspired solution. Similarly the concern with cordoning aspects of the school off from parents echoes traditional concerns about parent empowerment encroaching on teacher territory. Admittedly this point has to be considered in the context of the document’s function to outline the role and limitations of Parents’ Associations in schools.

Some sense of a distancing of parents may perhaps be identified in Possibilities for Partnership by the use of phrases such as ‘parental involvement in the work of school’ or ‘in the life of the school’ in preference to the more straightforward ‘parental involvement in schools’ (only two uses) in the final chapter. If the work of schools is the education of individual children, then the former wording may suggest that parental involvement is primarily related to involvement in the education of individual children, rather than on a whole-school basis. However, while this may indicate a distancing of parents in accordance with traditional constructions, the possibility that the phrasing was varied merely for syntax reasons cannot be discounted.

The notion that parent-teacher relations are ‘distanced’ or that parents are positioned as outsiders to schools indicates an inherently traditional assumption regarding the place of parents in schools. It is interesting, therefore, that four of the Irish documents, as well as a European one, include at least an element of this assumption. This suggests a relatively widespread presence of traditional assumptions regarding this particular aspect of parent-teacher power relations.

4.2.2.4 ‘Safe’ teacher-controlled involvement allowed

An interest in maintaining teacher control of the parent-teacher relationship and in encouraging forms of involvement that were regarded as ‘safe’ from a teacher point of view can be inferred from Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) and Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010). The concern with parent education apparent in Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010) may be related to the traditional encouragement given to Parent Associations to involve themselves in ‘safe’ activities. The absence of elaboration of possible forms of parental involvement in schools in Parents as Partners in Education, Circular 24/91 (DES) may indirectly acknowledge teacher concerns about ‘safe’ involvement.

Given that it is an INTO publication, the placing of responsibility on teachers for increasing parental involvement in schools in Possibilities for Partnership is expected. Nonetheless, it is notable
that almost all responsibility for parental involvement is assigned to teachers, with little comment on parents being active in organising their own participation, aside from the chapter on Parent Associations (pp. 70 -75). While Chapter 6 of the document explains the justification for Parent Associations and outlines their aims, it is somewhat unclear from it where the responsibility for organising ‘established structures that will foster and support the educational organisation of parents in schools’ (p70) is placed. There is a sense that this is a school or teacher responsibility, although admittedly this impression may arise because the document is directed at teachers rather than parents. If teachers are construed as being more active than parents in the development of parental involvement initiatives, this increases the likelihood that these initiatives will be controlled by teachers. It is notable that the ‘Programmes to promote parental involvement’ (pp. 82-110) that are discussed at length in the document are all forms of parental involvement that would fit into the traditional understanding of ‘safe’ involvement. They position teachers as educational experts providing information to parents. Inversely, parents are positioned as in need of education from the school regarding, for instance, how to help their children’s reading. Such programmes are unlikely to challenge traditional notions of teacher power in the relationship. Their educational merit is not in question, and as discussed in Section 5.5.5, these types of safe involvement might provide a stepping stone to broader based parental involvement. However, they also might function as a demonstration of teacher responsiveness to parents without actually affecting the existing power balance between parents and teachers.

Notwithstanding the implication that it is ‘safe’ forms of involvement that are sanctioned in Possibilities for Partnership, the repetition of the word ‘natural’ in the document (e.g. citing the Irish Constitutional provision that parents are the natural educators of their children), emphasises the right of parents to be involved. If the word ‘natural’ is considered with regard to synonyms such as effortless, relaxed and organic, however, (as in the advice to parents to allow children’s knowledge of sets develop naturally through play, p92) it may indirectly reinforce teacher discourses of safe involvement, by positioning strident or over enthusiastic parents as outside the range of ‘natural’ involvement.

A semblance of traditional approaches to power relations was detected in the priority given to ‘safe’ forms of parental involvement in Supporting Each Other. It is possible that both the NPC-P and IPPN are interested in protecting their respective interests through the document, despite their joint authorship of it. For instance, the reference to the Parent Association in providing local knowledge, organising speakers, accessing information on their children’s progress and on pupil safety (p8, 13) may be a NPC-P contribution, while the IPPN’s input can perhaps be detected in the comments on setting the boundaries of Parent Associations, and ensuring that Parent Associations do not ‘hinder the professional role and duty of the Principal and teachers’ (p10). With regard to ‘safe’ involvement, the list of suggestions for Parent Association activities (p13), while extensive, relates more to practical tasks in the school than ones that might alter the balance of power between teachers and parents. References to how ‘not all school policies require input from parents’ (p12) suggests that the
complementary expertise of parents is recognised in limited terms. The specification of certain policies
that parents should be involved in formulating echoes the traditional welfare/discipline orientated
understanding of parental expertise. Locating parents as supportive of the school (p13) may limit their
involvement to that deemed appropriate by the school or its teachers, thereby granting teachers a
significant degree of power. The interest in specifying clear procedures, rules for parent associations,
and boundaries of involvement may reflect principal (and teacher) concerns about the empowerment
of parents in schools and, therefore, an interest in regulating that power. This would be less in
accordance with democratic principles of the parent-teacher relationship than the overt messages of
the document suggest. Again, however, that the objective of the document is to provide a guide for
principals and Parents’ Associations must be acknowledged as relevant to this specification of roles
and responsibilities.

*Education for Tomorrow* was not found to contain a compensatory model of parental
involvement among its themes. However, a strong interest in parent education is a feature of the
document. Four areas in which parent education should be provided are specified, with ‘parent
education’ forming the first section of the policy position on parental involvement. Traditionally,
parent education was regarded as a ‘safe’ form of involvement for Parent Associations to occupy
themselves with, and the experience and expertise of the NPC-P in this area may explain the
apparently high priority given to it in their policy document. Interestingly, by not explicitly assigning
responsibility for parent education to either schools, parents or Parent Associations, and by omitting to
explain who is to be ‘educated’ and who is to do the ‘educating’, the more controversial aspects of the
parent education model are avoided in the document. It is difficult, therefore, to identify from the
document the discursive assumptions that might underlie the NPC-P approach to parent education, but
an alignment with ‘safe’ forms of involvement seems possible.

Despite the detail provided in relation to establishing Parents’ Associations, that other means
of involving parents in schools are not expounded is a striking feature of *Parents as Partners in
Education*. While this omission may occur for a variety of reasons, an awareness of teacher
sensitivities around the issue of parental involvement may be indicated by it. By confining itself
mainly to indicating the orientation towards parents that is expected from schools, the circular avoids
the more controversial aspects of parental involvement arising from the influence of traditional
influences in the education system. That this circular marks a new direction in parent-teacher relations
due to its use of the terminology of partnership may have made the issue of conflict avoidance all the
more pertinent. The references to the work of the Primary Education Review Body, the NPC-P and the
Social Partners allow the DES appeal to mass authority in presenting the case for parental
involvement, as well as distancing themselves somewhat from the argument. While the DES then were
not necessarily regarding parental involvement from a ‘safe involvement’ perspective in 1991, the
gaps and silences in the circular arguably demonstrate the influence of this concern among teacher
discourses at that time. As always with gaps and silences, however, this has to be a tentative claim.
The ‘safe’ involvement of parents is a particularly interesting concept, as it permits a positive response to calls for greater parental involvement in schools, while at the same time allowing the retention of traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations. It is an aspect of parent-teacher relations to which discourse analysis can very usefully be applied, therefore. While it is interesting that all of the documents in which discourses of ‘safe’ involvement were found are of Irish origin, this may be because of the greater specificity of these documents, which allowed ‘safe’ approaches to be identified more easily than in documents of a more general nature.

4.2.3 Traditional assumptions regarding the implementation of parental involvement in the documents analysed

4.2.3.1 ‘Fortress’ approach to the community

Although none of the documents advocated the ‘fortress’ approach to the local community mentioned in Section 2.2.3.2, comments in Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) demonstrate the influence of such a model on Irish parent-teacher relations in the past.

In the historical outline of the exclusion of parents from Irish schools provided in Possibilities for Partnership, the blame for this exclusion is attributed to ‘the dominance of church and State in Irish education’ (p1). While this conclusion may well be accurate, and church and state dominance in Irish education is widely acknowledged in the literature, it serves to blame elements in the local community as being responsible for the ‘virtual exclusion of parents from schools’ (p112), while also excusing the teaching profession from culpability. The idea of the school as a fortress in the past might provide some defence for teachers against accusations that they were reluctant to engage with parental involvement. The use of this defence is suggested by the occasional inference in the document that parental involvement is a new idea and that schools may not yet be ready for parental involvement, as training, funding and guidelines are still required (pp. 113, 114). This demonstrates the lasting effects of the fortress model on parent-teacher relations in Irish education, even if that model of home-school-community links is no longer applicable in present day educational discourse.

4.2.3.2 Limited formal structures for parental involvement deemed adequate

None of the Irish documents analysed included a challenge to the longstanding formal structures for parental involvement in Irish education (and obviously those from outside Ireland did not comment on Irish particularities). While at one level this could be interpreted as a satisfaction with existing structures, it is unwarranted to make such a claim based mainly on omission. It is more likely that challenging the fundamental management structures of Irish schooling is outside of the discursive limits when it comes to parental involvement. Rather it is assumed in the documentation that the parameters of parent representation through Boards of Management and Parents’ Associations must be worked within. For instance, the remit of Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010) was to provide a guide for the best possible operation of the existing Parent Association and Board of
Management structures in schools, so it would have not achieved its purpose had it included a challenge to the suitability of those structures. There is some sense, therefore, that the past (traditional constructions of the parent-teacher relationship) are constraining the development of new models of involvement into the future. Given the difficulty inherent in challenging longstanding and widely accepted forms of involvement and, indeed, the possibly counter-productive nature of so doing, it would seem that an acceptance (or lack of discussion) of these structures does not necessarily imply an adherence to traditional constructions. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the continuing relevance of traditional influences.

Notwithstanding the above, the emphasis on the formal structure of the Parents’ Association in *Parents as Partners in Education* (DES 1991) is notable. Of the six sections in the document, three relate directly to Parents’ Associations. The document is quite specific regarding how Boards of Management might establish Parents’ Associations in their schools, but not at all specific regarding other strategies that might be useful for developing partnerships. There is little discussion of how these Parents’ Associations might operate in practice as the focus of the document is on their establishment. That the establishment of Parent Associations was the DES priority in 1991 indicates the influence of traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations at that stage, at least in terms of the absence of such associations, and perhaps in terms of satisfaction with limited formal structures of parental involvement in schools.

4.2.3.3 ‘Rubber stamping’ role for parents’ representatives

Unsurprisingly, none of the documents analysed, all of which ostensibly advocated greater parental involvement in schools, assumed that parents would only have ‘rubber-stamping’ roles in schools. Such an assumption would clearly be outside of the discursive limits relating to parental involvement at the present time. However, a traditional view of parents’ roles in school decision-making can be inferred from the discussion of school decision-making and policy-making in *Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997).

Limited reference is made to parental involvement in decision-making in *Possibilities for Partnership*, with the focus instead being on positive home-school relations, communication between the home and the school, and the way in which parents can support their own child’s education at home. Of itself the absence of much discussion of parental involvement in decision-making, despite the document being entitled *Possibilities for Partnership*, may infer a traditional approach to parental involvement. As always when dealing with omissions this is a tentative inference, however.

Notwithstanding the above point, the recommendations about school planning and the development of school level policies that are made strongly in *Possibilities for Partnership* would initially appear to offer potential for the democratic involvement of parents. However, of the areas in which the formulation of school level policies are recommended (pp. 114-116), it is notable that only in relation to the policy on home-school links is the involvement of parents specifically mentioned;
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

‘Such a plan must be drawn up in consultation with parents’ representatives and take account of genuine parental concerns such as the issues that have been raised’ (INTO 1997:34). While this does give parents some input into the home-school links policy, arguably ‘consultation’ is quite a limited form of involvement, implying that the school will undertake most of the actual decision-making. Also, the inclusion of the word ‘genuine’ may have the effect of suggesting that not all issues raised by parents are ‘genuine’. If it is the school that decides on what is ‘genuine’ or not, this assumes a strong degree of school control over the decision-making process. Similarly, with regard to policies on assessment, record keeping and communication, the objective of these policies is to be ‘the provision of as much information as possible to parents’ (p116) rather than any comment on the contribution parents might have on deciding how this information is to be shared, and so traditional discourses seem pertinent. Furthermore, the discussion of school planning in terms of teachers taking greater control over their professional activities (p16) implies a tension between school planning as a way of involving parents and as a way of teachers justifying and communicating their professional activities, albeit that the two aims are not necessarily oppositional.

While traditional approaches regarding parental involvement in decision-making may be interpreted in *Possibilities for Partnership*, the document has to be read with the historic reluctance of teachers to share decision-making with parents in mind, as perhaps ‘consultation’ in limited policy areas might be a useful first step to greater parental involvement, whereas ambitious statements in the document about shared decision-making might merely have increased teacher resistance to it.

### 4.2.4 Traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations discussed in the interviews

None of the interviewees directly advocated traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations, although traditional assumptions were inferred from the comments of some respondents. All the interviewees described Irish primary education in a manner that suggests traditional discourses remain influential, to varying degrees.

#### 4.2.4.1 Interview with senior INTO official

The contention of the documentary discourse analysis, that traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations are apparent in *Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership*, was supported by the analysis of the INTO interviewee’s comments. Notably, however, the interviewee argued that while such constructions might have been pertinent in 1997, they are no longer applicable, and the presentation of this argument revealed interesting insights into INTO perspectives that are worthy of examination here.

As part of the discursive strategy of differentiating the past from the present, the INTO official made a number of references to the extent to which parents had been excluded from Irish schools in the past. No specific timeline was provided, but the implication was that the time before the publication of *Possibilities for Partnership* differed from that after it. The existence of a ‘fortress’
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

model in the past was implied; e.g. ‘we were moving from a situation where parents had been
excluded from the formal system’. While there was passing reference made to past clerical domination
of Boards of Management, the interviewee was candid in describing the reluctance of the ‘older
generation’ of teachers regarding parental involvement. He noted how the establishment of the NPC-P
‘wasn’t enthusiastically welcomed’ by teachers, and how some teachers were concerned with
‘boundaries’, ‘battles on their turf’ and seeing ‘trouble where there wasn’t necessarily going to be
trouble’. The remark that ‘we were moving parents in on their territory’ hinted at tensions between the
INTO and some of its teacher members regarding the appropriate involvement of parents. Indeed,
the interviewee confirmed that the cautious wording of the title Possibilities for Partnership had been a
deliberate attempt to reassure those teachers who were ‘very uncomfortable’ with the notion of greater
parental involvement in schools. While most of the teacher reluctance about parental involvement was
attributed to ‘older’ teachers, concerns about parents encroaching on professional matters was
presented as a more widely held concern of teachers, through the use of ‘us’ and ‘teachers’ without
qualification; e.g. ‘the original fears that parents would be coming in and telling us how to teach
Maths’. The interviewee’s candour in discussing teacher influences on the absence of parental
involvement in the past contrasts with the document. It is probable, however, that the passage of time,
the likelihood that most of the ‘older’ teachers are by now retired, and the interview setting made it
easier to discuss teacher factors in a way not possible in 1997, nor advisable in a document aimed at
all teachers.

Without disputing the accuracy of the interviewee’s claim that attitudes to parental
involvement in schools have changed since 1997, it is notable that the more emphasis that is placed on
the limited nature of parental involvement in the past, the more significant recent changes appear by
comparison. This has the effect of giving teachers credit for their greater engagement with parents,
even if that engagement remains restricted. Throughout the interview, the interviewee stressed the
positive nature of parent-teacher relations at the present time, concluding that ‘I think we have moved
on’ and that parental involvement is now part of ‘everyday practice for teachers’. Notably also, most
of the examples provided in the interview of how parent-teacher relations have changed since 1997
were in the form of things that schools/teachers have done for parents. As well as serving to praise
teachers this implies that schools/teachers retain a degree of control over the development of
relationships with parents. Arguably it may indicate a change of discursive strategy by the INTO in the
years since Possibilities for Partnership was published, in that in the former attention was paid to
avoiding teacher culpability for parental exclusion, whereas now emphasis is placed on demonstrating
how far teachers have come in terms of their openness to greater parental involvement. It is necessary
to qualify this, however, by noting that the ‘insider’ positionality of the interviewer as a fellow INTO
member may have influenced the interviewee’s openness in discussing teacher influences on parental
involvement in schools in the past.
The interviewee’s references to the near total exclusion of parents from some schools in the past can be viewed in an alternative light as well, as contextualising the development of interest in parent-teacher relations as almost inevitable. In light of DES support for greater parental involvement from at least the early 1980s, parental involvement in schools may have developed because teachers had little choice but to accept it, rather than because of major changes in teacher opinions. The interviewee discussed how *Possibilities for Partnership* was written with the intention of systematising, formalising and disseminating the good practice that had been happening in some schools prior to 1997, as well as to serve as a discussion document. He stressed its ‘ground-breaking’ nature, noting how some of its provisions are ‘stuff that we now take for granted’, thereby providing an example of the power of discourse over action. That the publication of a document on parental involvement by the INTO made a significant contribution to the debate cannot be doubted. However, given that the DES had established the NPC-P twelve years before, it is possible to argue that the document may have been an attempt to ensure that the INTO influenced a process that was by then well underway, rather than being of itself as ‘ground-breaking’ as suggested in the interview. This presents teacher agency with regard to parental involvement as less important than other interpretations would suggest. It also raises the possibility that greater parental involvement in schools may have emerged in spite of teacher held traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations, rather than as a result of their demise.

Although the interviewee was careful to highlight how teacher attitudes to parents have changed since the publication of *Possibilities for Partnership*, arguably a concern with ‘safe involvement’, characteristic of traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations, could be inferred from some of his comments. For instance, the understanding that ‘most parents want to leave it to the professionals’, was noted as having allayed teacher fears with regard to parental intrusion on their professional domain. This suggests that teachers remain concerned about the boundaries of parental involvement. A number of aspects of school-life in which the interviewee thought that parents need to be consulted were listed and while a meaningful role for parents in these areas was clearly advocated, this approach can also be critiqued in terms of an attempt to bound parental involvement in the school to areas deemed appropriate by teachers. Similarly, while the comment on the need to clarify roles for parents (for example, on Boards of Management) in order to reduce conflict is a practical and sensible one, a concern with role clarification also suggests an interest in defining boundaries between the parental and professional interests, in keeping with traditional discourses.

The need for good communication and information sharing between parents and teachers was a strong theme throughout the interview. However, the notion that parents have no desire to be involved in certain aspects of the school also recurred, with parents paraphrased as saying to teachers; ‘You do that, keep us informed, but we don’t want to be involved in the nitty-gritty of that’. Without denying the accuracy of these comments, they have the effect of placing responsibility for non-involvement in school decision-making on parents rather than on teachers. This assumption may
negate the need to discuss shared decision-making in schools, which would suit traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations. Indeed, in the discussion of common causes of tensions between parents and teachers there was no sense that parents would have had any input into these decisions, rather it was teachers and principals who were described as having ‘to make decisions that certain groups of parents mightn’t like’. Overcoming tensions was understood as a matter of building relationships with parents so that they trusted teacher/principal decision-making and were forgiving if mistakes were made; ‘they’ll know that you might have made a goof but your instincts are good’, rather than as a matter of including parents in decision-making. Admittedly the interviewee placed great emphasis on the professional responsibility of teachers to ‘inform’ parents and on the need to accommodate the views of as many people as possible. However, since ‘informing’ and ‘accommodating views’ are not necessarily the same as sharing decision-making with parents, the possibility of lingering traditional models of parent-teacher relations remains.

The possibility of lasting traditional influences was also raised by the interviewee’s discussion of power. He sought to minimize the exercise of power as an issue of concern to present day parent-teacher relationships, stating with regard to power struggles;

‘I don’t think that has transpired…I don’t think there ever was a big battle because I think schools moved to become more open and accountable to parents, and the more parents saw of what was going on in schools the more appreciative they were of it and once the rationale for doing things in a particular way was given to parents by and large it was accepted so I think that hasn’t taken place’.

This understanding of power relations gives credit to schools and teachers for being open to parents and thereby avoiding ‘battles’ with them, while construing parents as reasonable people. Again it emphasises the generally positive nature of present day parent-teacher relations. That parents ‘accepted’ the rationale they were given suggests parents did not take a very active role in schools and raises the possibility that relationships might have problematic had parents not been accepting of school perspectives. The notion of parents being ‘appreciative’ is interesting, not only because it infers a compliment on schools, but also because it implies that they were being given something by schools/teachers; in this instance an insight into the work of the school. It can be contended from this account that power struggles have not emerged in Irish schools because parents have been accepting and appreciative of school efforts to communicate with them, rather than seeking to exercise power themselves. Power struggles then have been avoided rather than resolved. The interviewee attributed the difficulties that exist ‘in the odd school’ to ‘a different reason, it’s not a theoretical or ideological power balance….it’s normally for a very particular reason’, and did not elaborate further. Arguably recognition of the complexity of power relations is necessary for genuine parent-teacher partnership, and perhaps, therefore, the minimisation of power as a relevant issue suggests a traditional construction of parental involvement, where teachers are satisfied with their influence over current practices. Admittedly the interviewee had included ‘to change the power relationship and the professional
relationship slightly’ as being among the reasons for the publication of *Possibilities for Partnership*, but the inclusion of the modifier ‘slightly’ may also suggest an interest in minimizing the consequences of power relations.

It was the opinion of the INTO interviewee that in terms of priorities in Irish education, parent-teacher relations are now more of a maintenance issue than an issue requiring radical change; ‘it continues to evolve, I think it’s seen as important, but it’s one of these things that we just do as normal now, and we continue it on’. The notion of continuation implies that parent-teacher relations are now satisfactory, and fits with the argument made throughout the interview, that parental involvement has been mostly solved as a problem in Irish education in the interval since the publication of *Possibilities for Partnership*. Without denying the changes that have occurred, it is notable that those who are benefitting or in control of a situation tend to be those most satisfied with it; therefore, this impression of INTO contentment with the status quo of parental involvement at present may indicate that teacher control of parent-teacher relations remains a feature of Irish education, as in traditional discourses.

Arguably then traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations underlie many aspects of both *Possibilities for Partnership* and the INTO interview, even though the presentation of parent-teacher relations in each differed, and the co-existence of democratic discourses is not denied. Given that teachers are likely to be vulnerable should negative consequences of parental involvement occur in schools it is perhaps unsurprising that their representative body would find it difficult to dispense with traditional models, even as it seeks to advance new forms of relationships.

4.2.4.2 Interview with senior IPPN official

The sense that of the education partners, teachers find it most difficult to move away from traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations was also supported by the traditional assumptions that were inferred from the interview with the senior IPPN official. The implications drawn from *Supporting Each Other* regarding the need to regulate parental involvement and the interest in safe involvement were confirmed to some extent from the IPPN interviewee’s comments.

The IPPN respondent made a distinction between a past exclusion and a present inclusion of parents in education. He explained how parent-teacher interaction in the past (c. 30 years ago) was mainly problem-based, attributing this at least partially to teacher factors; ‘You know years back you sent for a parent when something was wrong but other than that there wasn’t a great tendency to view them as partners in the whole education process of their children’. The use of ‘years back’ relegated this traditional approach to parental involvement firmly in history, and the interviewee was optimistic (at least in this part of the interview) that ‘all that has changed hugely and that’s all very much to the good’. Notably, the examples provided in support of this ‘good news story’ relate mainly to individual parent-teacher relationships rather than whole-school forms of involvement. The presentation of a past/present dichotomy also serves IPPN purposes in the same way as they suit INTO purposes, by
making recent changes seem more significant and by giving credit to principals for the improvements that have occurred.

Despite initially assigning traditional constructions of parental involvement to the past, the interviewee also noted that ‘the change in the mind-set of teachers hasn’t fully gone the whole way yet’. He commended the *Educate Together* movement as having the only schools that really do involve parents in an educational partnership manner in Ireland. He stated ‘the truth would be that if we’re being honest about it in an awful lot of schools the traditional thinking prevails even yet, whereby the principal feels he or she is the person in charge, the staff come after that and at the bottom of the pyramid then come the parents’. The phrase ‘if we’re being honest about it’ implies that such approaches are frequently denied in Irish education. The interviewee emphasised that he was ‘not for a minute justifying it or saying that is as it ought to be’, although the inference (discussed later in this section) that principals need to control and monitor Parents’ Associations belied these claims somewhat. The point that traditional models of parent-teacher relations linger in Irish schools was very similar to that made by the NPC-P respondent. Perhaps then, while the frequency and nature of parent-teacher interactions have increased greatly over the past twenty years in Irish schools, this may not equate to real and meaningful changes to parental involvement in schools. The mention of being ‘in charge’ of the school suggests that it is primarily whole-school level or decision-making involvement that is being referred to here and, indeed, a sense of caution with regard to these forms of involvement was apparent throughout the interview.

The interviewee’s comment, in explaining the circumstances from which *Supporting Each Other* arose, that prior to its publication ‘the role of parents in education was very undefined and the involvement of parents seemed to be very erratic, it was quite good in places and non-existent in others’, as well as echoing both the NPC-P and the INTO interviewees’ comments, drew attention to the differences between and within the various levels of the Irish education system. Accordingly it highlighted the different ways in which discourses are accepted, rejected and altered contextually. While the interviewee was able to give a clear account of the IPPN’s ideal regarding parental involvement, such clarity of purpose and understanding is often lacking in schools’ experiences of parental involvement, as least in the account he provided. This highlights the difficulty inherent in identifying the discourses influencing parent-teacher relations in Irish schools, in that those accepted and circulated by national organisations such as the IPPN are not necessarily those having most impact at school level. This allows the survival of traditional approaches to parental involvement at school level, despite changing attitudes at national and systemic level to the place of parents in schools.

The influence of traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations on the IPPN perspective itself could also be detected from the interview transcript. For instance, the interviewee made reference to ‘controlling parental access to times which are going to make it most meaningful’. While this point was made in the practical context of the need for appointments and the undeniable difficulty for teachers when talking to a parent unexpectedly while also trying to manage a class, arguably the
controlling of parental involvement can be seen as a way to counteract the possibly threatening effects of parent empowerment. The interviewee was careful, however, to correct himself when he initially used the word ‘curtailing’ rather than ‘controlling’ in explaining this point, so he was not wholeheartedly advocating a traditional approach in terms of keeping parents as ‘outsiders’ in the school.

As in Supporting Each Other, the problematic potential of not defining and delineating Parents’ Association roles was a strong theme in the interview. The interviewee described how there are a lot of Parents’ Associations ‘who do not know their own role and for want of knowing their role they invariably stick their nose in where they shouldn’t and cause that kind of conflict and aggro’.

Admittedly, however, the interest in regulating Parents’ Associations might be inspired by practical concerns as much as by discursive assumptions, so the interviewee’s recommendation that the school principal always be present at Parents’ Association meetings is perhaps more noteworthy. He advised this as a means to counter the Parents’ Association becoming ‘a kind of a knocking shop’ to ‘give out’ about the school. While the interviewee was careful to emphasise that this attendance should support partnership with parents, and that the principal should talk ‘with’ the parents and not ‘to’ them, it is interesting that it was the sole issue identified as being a source of disagreement between him and his NPC-P co-author of Supporting Each Other. The insinuation that the principal needs to retain control over parental involvement at whole-school levels is in accordance with traditional constructions.

The interviewee’s concern with ensuring that Parents’ Associations are clear about ‘what it is that you are and equally what it is that you are not,’ may also be associated with the traditional concept of ‘safe involvement’. For instance, he seemed to regard parental involvement in the education of their own children as ‘safe’ but parental involvement in school management structures or decision-making as much less ‘safe’. The interview confirmed what had been already inferred from the analysis of Supporting Each Other in this regard. Perhaps then it is possible to claim that the interviewee described parent-teacher partnership around the education of the child in democratic terms, but that this partnership is to occur within the broader context of traditional concerns about the need to maintain teacher power and control over the school space. This is not to deny, however, that there are aspects of the school in which Parents’ Association involvement would be inappropriate, and that Parents’ Associations need to be aware of these. Notably too, the interviewee confirmed that the low priority given to fundraising in Supporting Each Other was deliberate, and as such challenged that particular aspect of ‘safe’ involvement.

The IPPN interviewee’s contribution, therefore, supported the contention that traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations still exert considerable influence on primary education, both through his description of practice, and more implicitly in terms of the IPPN’s own concerns regarding parental involvement. Again this reveals the difficulty inherent in freeing teachers and principals from traditional constructions, even if they are genuinely trying to engage with democratic models.
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

4.2.4.3 *Interview with senior NPC-P official*

The NPC-P interviewee did not espouse traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations. Indeed, the inferences drawn from *Education for Tomorrow* with regard to traditional approaches to parent education and teachers as experts were challenged as a result of the interview. Nonetheless, her comments support the claim that traditional models of parental involvement remain influential, particularly at school level, in Irish primary education.

Although the interviewee was optimistic about the influence parents now have at national policy-making levels in Ireland, she discussed how this has not necessarily transferred to school level. For instance, based on knowledge gleaned from her involvement with the NPC-P helpline, the interviewee referred to schools that exclude parents in a variety of ways, even from the formal structures of the school. In light of the explicit provisions in the *1998 Education Act* with regard to the operation of Parents’ Associations and Boards of Management, that schools can refuse to implement them demonstrates a very considerable exercise of power as well as clearly indicating the survival of traditional approaches to parent-teacher power relations. Hence, the somewhat dictatorial tone that was identified in *Education for Tomorrow* with regard to parental empowerment needs to be understood in light of parental frustration with the power schools have, and exercise, in excluding parents from meaningful involvement.

The interviewee did not make any attempt to quantify the amount of schools that are reluctant to engage with parents, but the general nature of her discussion of the limitations of parental involvement at school level suggests that she sees traditional assumptions about ‘safe’ involvement’ and positioning parents as ‘outsiders’ as relevant in many. She noted the difficulties parents often have when trying to engage in ‘learning conversations’ with the school, how the parent-teacher meeting tends to be seen as ‘the big event of the year’ with regard to parental involvement, and how teacher education about parents often revolves around preparing for and ‘managing’ parent-teacher meetings. She commented on the inclination even at national policy-making levels to see parents primarily in terms of their financial relationship with schooling; for example, through focussing on ‘back to school costs’. Without doubting the accuracy of the interviewee’s contention that traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations remain relevant, especially at school level, it is notable that this presentation serves to place all the blame for a lack of parental involvement on schools and teachers. Avoiding parental culpability for non-involvement in schools is likely to be in accordance with the NPC-P’s agenda as a parent representative body.

The NPC-P respondent attributed much teacher reluctance regarding parental involvement to problems defining parent-teacher partnership, resulting in what she perceived as teachers’ tendency to interpret partnership in ways that make them fearful of it. She explained how teachers often think that ‘partnership’ involves parents ‘standing at the top of the class teaching with the teacher’ and that they are ‘likely not to be pro-parental involvement’ as a result of this understanding. The interviewee discussed how the legislation addressing parental involvement in Ireland does not provide a
framework for parental involvement; ‘it doesn’t actually say what the relationship should be, it’s just that they should be there’. She argued that this absence of the ‘relationship piece’ in educational policies creates a ‘vacuum’, as a result of which ‘people start to look after their space rather than open up their space’. In other words her contention is that in the absence of a clearly understood concept of parent-teacher partnership, teachers are inclined to return to the comfort of familiar traditional constructions of the parent-teacher relationship.

The contrast between the clarity with which the interviewee presented her understanding of parent-teacher partnership and the absence of such a definition in *Education for Tomorrow* is notable. A number of possible reasons for this disparity can be suggested, although since they were not discussed during the interview they are only tentatively raised. The possibility that their definition of parent-teacher partnership is so taken for granted by the NPC-P that they did not see the need to present it in *Education for Tomorrow* seems unlikely given the interviewee’s criticism of the lack of definition of the concept in Ireland generally. Given that the policy document is updated annually it also seems unlikely that the definition provided by the interviewee would only have emerged since the publication of the document. In light of the very different tone of the interview from that of the document, perhaps the interviewee’s concept of parent-teacher partnership differs from that of the delegates who contribute to the NPC-P policy document. Issues of positionality and the specific context of the interview may also have influenced the definition provided, although again this seems unlikely given the fluency and confidence with which the interviewee explained her understanding of the NPC-P’s position.

While the interviewee herself then did not seem to be influenced by traditional assumptions during the course of the interview, her description of parental involvement in Irish education suggests that traditional constructions remain relevant. Indeed, her description of the present day situation at school level was very similar to that provided by the INTO respondent, except that the INTO respondent was describing the situation two decades ago. While both have their own reasons for emphasising certain aspects of parent-teacher relations, the point that traditional influences remain important in Irish education seems undeniable.

### 4.2.4.4 Interview with senior ‘Educate Together’ official

As expected from the documentary analysis, the approach to parental involvement outlined by the Educate Together respondent was not based on traditional assumptions. She described how parent-teacher relations have improved greatly over the two decades she has been involved with the Educate Together movement but, nonetheless, her account of present day concerns and realities in education implied a continuing influence for traditional constructions of parental involvement, especially at school level. For instance, she noted how parents perceive that all the power in parent-teacher relationships is with the school, and yet teachers are often frustrated with and fearful of parents. Given
the similarities between the Educate Together interviewee’s account in this regard and that of the other interviewees, further elaboration is not deemed necessary here.

4.2.4.5 Interview with Education Consultant

While the Education Consultant discussed parental involvement in a way that suggests that traditional discourses are influential in Irish education, her account complicated the influence of these constructions more than those of the other interviewees.

In common with the other informants, the Education Consultant described a past where parents were not involved in schools. She noted, for instance, how prior to the establishment of the NPC-P, parental involvement ‘was a fairly radical idea’, and she paraphrased educational insiders at the time as saying that parental involvement would never work. The mid 1980s were referred to as ‘a tricky enough time’ in terms of trying ‘to get the whole notion off the ground’. This supports the contention that traditional discourses, where parents were not seen as having a role in education, were dominant in the past. On the contrary, however, the interviewee also noted how the newly formed NPC-P ‘didn’t push a closed door’ as there were already parents’ organisations in existence. She outlined how management bodies such as the CPSMA ‘had a committed position of the importance of parents in education’. The crucial role of the DES and the Inspectorate in founding the NPC-P was discussed, as was the support of individuals in the INTO. The Education Consultant contrasted the decision of the other organisations associated with parental involvement in primary education to step back and leave the way clear for the NPC-P with the ‘difficult birth’ of the secondary branch of the NPC, noting that the success of the NPC-Post Primary remains negatively affected by its less cohesive origins. Arising from these remarks, it seems too simplistic to describe the situation three decades ago in terms only of traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations at primary level.

The interviewee’s account, however, raises questions as to the extent in reality of the support obtained from the various organisations mentioned. She described, for example, how the INTO regarded the NPC-P as a ‘potential ally’ and how some people would argue that they ‘used’ the NPC-P to further their own aims. Even in the case of the DES, reference was made to how a particular Minister ‘gazumped’ the NPC-P to suit her own purposes. Arguably then some of the support for parental involvement that the interviewee identified in the 1980s and 1990s may not actually challenge the notion that traditional constructions were dominant. This demonstrates the difficulty inherent in identifying discursive assumptions, as well as pointing to the limits of discourse in affecting action in certain circumstances as well.

The assertion that there was an openness towards parental involvement in certain sectors of the education system that was not exploited until the DES became proactively involved in the issue also supports the point that teachers and principals are most likely to be influenced by traditional discourses. In common with the other interviewees the Education Consultant stated that even with good relationships at national level ‘every individual group of parents in their Parents’ Association had
to make the case themselves and that was patchy and remains so’. Despite the longstanding nature of
the competing discourses, therefore, they have proved unable to fully challenge teacher held
traditional approaches to parents. This is significant in terms of power relations. It illustrates that
despite DES power at policy-making levels, teachers exercise considerable power at school levels.

Interestingly, the interviewee discussed her opinion that at the present time the Department of
Education is challenged ‘to exercise the influence it properly ought to have’. She cited the proposed
(at the time of the interview) admissions legislation and the inability of parents to complain directly to
the inspectorate as evidence of a ‘disempowerment of parents and allowing the Department to step
back in its responsibilities’. She commented on how the legislative basis for parental involvement in
the 1998 Education Act ‘is more honoured in the breach than the observance’ and how Boards of
Management tend to see themselves as advisory rather than governance bodies. Such observations
support the contention that traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations remain pertinent.
Interestingly, however, she also stated that she did not believe the teacher unions and the management
bodies to be as ‘influential with the Department as they would have been in the past’. Perhaps,
therefore, the situation is more complicated than merely suggesting that teachers have managed to
keep decision-making power away from parents, and may relate more to Departmental priorities and
interests, albeit these would also be discursively influenced.

4.2.4.6 Interview with Senior Inspector

The likelihood that traditional constructions of parental involvement remain influential at
school level in Irish education was confirmed by the Senior Inspector’s account. She discussed how
schools are welcoming of parents as long as their involvement takes particular forms, how parents can
feel de-skilled in comparison with the expertise of the teachers and the tendency to ask parents to ‘sign
off’ on decisions rather than to meaningfully involve them. While this discussion was in common with
that of other interviewees, the interviewee’s comments on the ‘targeted’ nature of parental
involvement are notable. She also offered insights into how teachers can value parental involvement
and yet exclude parents from involvement, and into how parents as well as teachers are constructed by
traditional discourses at school level.

That parental involvement in Irish schools tends to be closely associated with a compensatory
model was more strongly apparent in the Inspector’s account than that of other interviewees. She
described how schools have ‘reached out over the last number of years to a particular parent
populations (sic)’ by developing parents rooms and running courses for parents, noting especially the
success of DEIS schools in this regard. While these actions are laudable, they may serve to construct
certain parents as ‘deficient’ as well as reinforcing the notion of the expertise of the teacher. By
suggesting that ‘there’s an issue there around power’ the interviewee seemed to be locating this in the
context of traditional constructions, in that the involvement of ‘a particular target group of parents’
seems unlikely to threaten existing power structures.
Noting how caring and responsible the vast majority of teachers are, the Inspector explained ‘when you carry that burden of responsibility it’s very difficult for you to share with anybody else the delivery of it’. This raises the possibility of an interesting connection between the exclusion of parents from meaningful involvement and teachers’ understanding of their professional duties. Even if teachers value parental involvement, the concern that it could interfere with core teaching responsibilities may lead to them giving parents unimportant tasks and thereby limiting their involvement; ‘we’ve been giving them their own little bowl and letting them mess with that little bowl while we do this’. Obviously this indicates a low trust for the capacities of parents and, indeed, the Inspector’s analogy of a child ‘helping’ a parent to make a birthday cake to explain it implies that a somewhat condescending view of parents underlies this approach by teachers. This perspective allows, however, for two conflicting discursive strands to be reconciled, these being the understanding that parental involvement is valuable and beneficial and yet that parental involvement needs to be controlled and constrained.

The Inspector commented that power relations between parents and schools should be examined from two perspectives; that of the school being reluctant to relinquish any power but also that of parents unwilling to take on the responsibility that comes with exercising power. While she was careful to note that parents are reluctant to become involved in schools for a variety of complex reasons, the positioning of parents as well as teachers by traditional discourses could be inferred from her account. The Inspector drew attention to a possible disconnection between parents at school level and at national level that helps explain this traditional positioning at school level. She noted, for instance, how the majority of parents would not be aware of the work being done by the NPC-P at national level. She also commented on the lack of awareness individual parents often have of the work of Parents’ Associations in their own schools. In the absence of communication across the levels of the system it is unsurprising then that traditional discourses tend to be dominant at school levels despite the democratic approaches in circulation at national levels.

While then the Inspector’s contribution confirmed the notion that traditional discourse are still relevant in Irish schools, it is notable that she seemed to understand these as potentially developing into other more meaningful types of involvement. Her comment that to get to ‘really meaningful involvement …..you have to get to that place through all kinds of deepening what’s already happening through tokenism’, suggests that traditional discourses, rather than merely constraining parental involvement, can also serve as initial steps towards greater involvement.

4.2.4.7 Interview with senior NCCA official

Traditional assumptions regarding parent-teacher relations were not identified in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009). Therefore, it was not expected that they would be a strong feature of the NCCA respondent’s discussion, and this expectation proved accurate.
The NCCA interviewee did not explicitly compare the past with the present regarding parental involvement in Irish primary education. Nonetheless, her tracing of legislative developments that have advanced the position of parents in Irish education since the 1998 Education Act implies that parent-teacher relations have changed in the intervening years. This is in keeping with the comments of other interviewees, and again supports the notion that traditional discourses regarding parents were dominant in the past.

The continued influence of such traditional notions on practices of parent-teacher relations could be inferred from the interviewee’s discussion of NCCA reviews finding that parents ‘remain at a distance in terms of a more significant involvement in children’s learning’, despite developments in the information that parents receive from schools and early childhood settings. Again this echoes the comments of the other interviewees.

4.2.5 Concluding remarks regarding traditional constructions in the sources analysed

Arising from the documentary discourse analysis and the analysis of the interview transcripts a number of arguments can be made with regard to traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations. Traditional discourses were indisputably dominant in the past, although the precise timeline of when these began to be challenged is debatable. Present understandings of how a professional teacher should interact with parents, and what roles parents should have in education are, therefore, heavily influenced by these historical assumptions.

The possibility that parental involvement threatens teacher professionalism, that teachers are fearful of parental involvement and that parental involvement needs to be controlled by schools, remains a feature of the discourse around parents. The potential for conflict in parent-teacher relationships was more openly expressed in the interviews than in the more constrained context of the documents. That these assumptions are particularly evident in the perspectives of the INTO and IPPN is significant, given the importance of teacher attitudes to parents at school level. They are likely to present a considerable barrier to the development of greater parental involvement in schools, therefore.

Given that teachers appear more susceptible to traditional influences than others in the educational system, it can be contended that traditional constructions take the form of a bottom-up discourse, whereas managerial and democratic ones are more top-down. This is supported by the finding that despite traditional discourses not being overtly present in the documents analysed, all of the interviewees described school level relationships in ways that suggest traditional discourses are strongly influential in school practices. It is likely that the familiarity of traditional understandings of the parent-teacher relationship is attractive to teachers, particularly when the alternatives are not properly defined. It can also be argued that there is a degree of disconnection between the practice and policy levels of the educational system. This helps explain why traditional discourses remain strong at school level, despite evidence that parental involvement is more accepted at national policy-making levels and, indeed, by national organisations, even those representative of teachers.
The poor conceptualisation of parental involvement that was apparent from the research may inadvertently allow the continuation of traditional constructions also, if parents and teachers confuse limited forms of involvement with genuine partnership. The absence of clear definitions of parental involvement in much of the literature is striking in this regard, albeit these omissions raise questions too as to the discursive assumptions underpinning the documents.

The gulf between policy and practice (and policy and practice levels of the system) indicates the difficulty inherent in mandating concepts such as parental involvement, which ultimately depend on the goodwill of individual parents and teachers. It also points to the relative autonomy of schools in the Irish education system, and their capacity to resist top-down discourses. This results in arguments for parental involvement having to be made over and over again at school level, and new relationships having to be constantly established as the cohort of parents change. By contrast, therefore, the limited number of people that are involved at national policy-making levels, their often longstanding service (as evidenced from interviewees’ accounts) and the formality of these processes may have made it easier to challenge traditional constructions at these levels. Notwithstanding these possibilities, however, the disparity also raises questions as to the extent to which alternative constructions of parent-teacher relationships are being promoted from Departmental and European levels. The sense of distanced or separate relationships between teachers and parents that was inferred from some of the Departmental and European documents is notable in this respect.

4.3 Managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations in the discourse sources analysed

As outlined in Section 2.3, parental involvement in schools is justified in the managerial model primarily due to its beneficial effects on raising student attainment. School responsibility and activity with regard to parents is emphasised and the norms of the home are required to move nearer to those of the school, with parental involvement that is visible to the school expected. In a market model of schooling the public relations aspects of parental involvement are important, as is a perceived need to align the school with powerful interests who may enhance its prestige as well as making practical and financial contributions. Parents, especially educated ones, tend to be positioned powerfully in the managerial model in comparison to teachers, and parent power may be advocated as a means of curbing teacher power. Teacher accountability to parents is a strong theme of managerial constructions. It has been argued also, however, that parent power in managerial constructions is a very limited form of power, effective only as long as it advances the aims of the State, as the State is the real holder of power, and so both teachers and parents are in positions of powerlessness. Furthermore, some parents may be regarded as ‘deficient’ based on their educational, social or cultural background and these parents remain in relatively powerless positions, despite the rhetoric of parental empowerment.
Managerial constructions of the parent-teacher relationship tend to assume that legislative approaches are the most efficient way to achieve better parent-teacher relations and increase parental involvement. Accordingly most attention is paid to quantifiable forms of involvement that are easy to mandate and measure. Legislative approaches imply a degree of centralisation and often require top-down procedures of implementation, and so the role of school leadership in developing parent involvement tends to be emphasised. Arising from this, managerial constructions of parental involvement in schools tend to focus on site-based management structures, where parent representatives are elected through a process of adversarial democracy and are assumed to be representative of all parents, without more complex issues of representation being considered. Adversarial democracy results in the prioritisation of the concerns of the majority, often at the expense of the minority, while its competitive approach can mean self-interest, rather than the common good, is its main motivating factor. (cf. inter alia Vincent 1996b; Edward & Warin 1999; Crozier & Davies 2007; Brien & Stelmach 2009).

4.3.1 Managerial justifications for parental involvement in schools/education in the documents analysed

4.3.1.1. School-centric approach, home to be more like school

A school-centric approach to parental involvement can be noted from Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011); Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010) and Involve Parents, Improve School (EACEA 2009).

A strongly school-centric model underpins Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life, in that parental involvement is conceptualised in terms of the need for the home to learn from and be responsive to the school, rather than vice versa. Admittedly, the first subsection discusses the importance of parental interest in the education of young children, describing their role as ‘vital for literacy and numeracy’, and the family as ‘the best environment for young children’. However, the specific reference to 0-3 years, and ‘laying the foundations for further learning’ (p19) suggests that a home-centric view is most applicable to very young children, rather than those in formal educational settings. Similarly, that ‘parents have much to offer schools’ (p19) is acknowledged, but is immediately followed by recommendations as to how schools should support parents, suggesting that the school to home connection (in contrast to home to school) is regarded as most important in the strategy. Furthermore, the school-centric approach is reinforced by terms such as ‘ensuring the message….gets through to parents’ (p20), the need for schools to ‘forge strong links’ (x2), and to ‘harness’ collective effort (p20), which imply hard, almost physical work on the part of schools to ensure that the home is in accordance with the norms of the school. The heading of the action plan ‘actions to enable parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development’ (p22) suggests that in the absence of these actions parents would not be able to support their children’s learning. This again serves to emphasis the centrality of the school to the parent-child relationship.
The school, therefore, is seen as the site of learning, with the home positioned as needing to fulfil the requirements of the school. This is in accordance with managerial approaches to parental involvement. Although *Education for Tomorrow* is a NPC-P publication, and by its very existence implies a role for the home in educational matters, much of its vision of education, and by extension parental involvement, is strongly school-centric. Throughout the document almost all the uses of the word ‘education’ (except when it was used as a proper noun) could have been interchanged with ‘schooling’ without altering their meaning. Education, from the perspective of this document, is schooling, and parents, therefore, are construed in relation to the school in which their children attend. The NPC-P is described as ‘the representative organisation for parents of children in primary or early education’ (p3), although its presentation of a policy position on Children’s Rights in the *Irish Constitution* (p7) (an important topic in public debate at the time of publication) indicates that it sees a broader role for itself than just representing school-parents. In keeping with the school-centric approach, all but one of the types of parental involvement discussed in *Education for Tomorrow* are of a type visible to the school. The document contains a brief section on ‘learning at home’ (p20), but an interest in making the education provided in the home like that of the school is apparent in the section. Learning at home is connected strongly to learning in school, and responsibility is placed on schools to ‘provide information and ideas to families about how to help their children at home with homework and other curriculum related activities, decisions and planning’ (p20). This is in keeping with managerial perspectives of the role of the school and the home.

Parental involvement in schools in *Involve Parents, Improve School* is justified from a school-centric perspective, as evidenced by the description of the ‘target group’ of parents in the project being ‘those who have so far been outside of school where teachers have had only marginal influence’ (*IP-IS Final Report* p3). This implies that these parents are to be brought within the influence of the school and the teachers, but omits to consider the possibility of parents influencing schools and teachers. A school-centric approach can also be inferred from the description of the overall aim of the project being: ‘closing the gap between teacher education courses and the demands of the school authorities’ (*IP-IS Final Report* p3), as the initiative was ultimately directed at teachers, and at developing their skills to engage with parents. Such a school-centric perspective is in keeping with managerial justifications of parental involvement, even if the very focus of the project (on the school improvements to be achieved from parental involvement) inherently acknowledges that education is at least to some degree a shared responsibility between home and school.

Given the common association between ‘education’ and ‘schooling’, education documents tend to be school-centric. Nevertheless, documents discussing parental involvement might be expected to conceptualise education in broader terms, including the educational role of the home. The school-centric nature of the parental involvement envisaged in these three documents is notable, therefore, albeit that recognition of the joint endeavour of the home and school in education is more prevalent across the discourse generally.
4.3.1.2. Parental involvement as an instrument to raise attainment

A blatantly instrumental approach to parental involvement is not to be found in most of the Irish documentation, almost all of which makes some reference to the benefits of parental involvement in a holistic sense. Given that the overall focus of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011) is on pupil attainment rather than on parental involvement it is unsurprising that this is the Irish document in which the strongest sense of an instrumental approach to parental involvement can be detected. Since neither the World Bank (*How can we Make Schools Work Better?* 2012) nor the OECD (*Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* 2012), are educational organisations in the strict sense of the term, an instrumental focus for parental involvement in their documentation is not surprising either.

The term ‘parental involvement’ is not used in the heading of the section of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* that addresses the role of parents in the education of their children, but instead reference is made to ‘enabling’ parents to support their children. An uncomplicated association between parental involvement in the education of their own children and increased attainments in literacy and numeracy is made in the document, in keeping with the simple problem-solving tendencies of managerialism. The sense of urgency that permeates the text in relation to the need to raise attainments in literacy and numeracy affects the recommendations in relation to greater parental involvement, in that parental support is seen as something that is too important to be left to chance. In this way, parental involvement is construed as being part of the school’s and, indeed, the state’s business, with a co-ordinated national effort required for ‘Enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development’ (p19). The listing of actions that need to be completed in order to ensure that parents support their children’s learning implies that a very deliberate, conscious and managed approach is required if this support is to be beneficial (pp. 22-25).

Aside even from the above features, the inclusion of a discrete chapter addressing parental and community involvement within the strategy document indicates that parental involvement is considered an important instrument for the raising of pupil achievement.

In terms of ensuring that parents act as agents of school objectives regarding literacy and numeracy, the parent education model present in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* stretches beyond informing parents of the specific actions they should do to support their children’s learning, to encouraging them to develop particular attitudes and opinions regarding their own role in their children’s education, thereby changing norms and values in relation to parental involvement. The first objective of the action plan is to ‘Support a national information campaign to build up awareness of the important role that parents and communities can play in supporting literacy and numeracy learning’. The level of detail provided regarding this objective indicates the importance attached to ensuring that parents understand the role being given to them in this strategy, as do phrases such as ‘heighten parental expectations and help them to take an increased interest in the standards their children achieve’ (p23). One of the core assumptions of the strategy then is not only that parents have
an important role to play in their children’s education, but that they do not recognise the importance of their own role at the present time, and so need to be informed about it. The language of enablement used in the chapter title also expresses this view, as if parents need to be ‘enabled’ then presumably they (or some of them) are not currently ‘able’. An interest in parental involvement almost solely in terms of its effects on academic attainment, and a concern that parents see a role for themselves in increasing attainments, is characteristic of managerial approaches to parent-teacher relations.

*How can we Make Schools Work Better?* discusses the results of various parental and community involvement interventions in Indonesian schools based on Maths and Language tests that were administered to pupils during and after the initiatives. While the comment that ‘Getting children to school is only the first step’ (p1) implies a greater role for parents in schools than that understood by the traditional model, the description of the project as being ‘to test different ways to empower local school committees and increase student learning, as measured by test scores’ (p1) indicates the narrowness of the approach taken to parental involvement. An initiative that increased the time parents and teachers spent on lessons with children was not deemed a success as ‘it did not lead to better learning results, despite the gains in both parental and teacher involvement in student studies’. While this illustrates the complexity of the link between parental involvement and academic attainment, notably increased parental involvement in and knowledge of their children’s education was of itself not deemed even a partial success for the purposes of the project described. Without denying that student attainment is undoubtedly crucial for the success of a school system, the absence of any discussion of other beneficial effects as a result of the various interventions reveals a restricted justification for parental involvement in schools, characteristic of managerial approaches.

An interest in identifying how parental involvement may improve student outcomes and reduce performance differences (p3) is a core theme of the research reported in *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies*. Parental involvement is, therefore, regarded as an instrument through which to increase pupil attainment. A close connection is made between the purposes of parental involvement and pupil attainment; ‘parental involvement only benefits children when something of value to children’s education is transferred (p16)’. The concern with ‘transferring’ things of ‘value’ to children indicates a measurable approach, as well as raising the possibility that only some parents are capable of such transference. The intention expressed in the document to examine ‘the extent to which parental involvement matters’ (p10) (for pupils’ cognitive skill acquisition and capacity for life-long learning, but with a focus on reading in this document) implies both that children’s reading attainment is fully measurable, and that the connection between it and parental involvement can also be fully measured. Arguably this over-simplifies the complex relationship between parental involvement and attainment, and so is in accordance with managerial approaches.

Since the making of a direct connection between parental involvement and pupil attainment is a strong indicator of managerial approaches to parent-teacher relations, it is particularly significant
that this was found to be a feature of a recent DES document, although it was not a strong theme otherwise in the Irish discourse sources.

4.3.1.3 Low trust model of teacher accountability to parents

It is in Commission Staff Working Paper, Schools for the 21st Century (Commission of the European Communities 2007) that the assumption that making teachers more accountable to parents will improve schools is most apparent. Teacher accountability to parents is not an overt justification for parental involvement in the Irish documents analysed. However, some interest in increasing teacher accountability can be inferred from Parents as Partners in Education (DES 1991), Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (Department of Education and Skills 2011) and Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010), with a lack of trust for teachers a striking feature of the latter. The concern with conflict avoidance that underlies Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010) may be indicative of low trust in the relationship between parents and principals.

The co-location of partnership and accountability in Schools for the 21st Century is notable, in that the statement ‘Public debate increasingly refers to the desirability of schools working in partnership with other agencies and organisations’ is immediately followed by ‘Processes vary for ensuring that schools are accountable to the communities they serve’ (p10). Hence, accountability rather than partnership seems to be the priority, with partnership conceptualised as a way of achieving accountability. Similarly, the iteration of the requirement to ‘foster a culture of democracy in schools, involving students, parents and teachers’, (p9) appears to be in line with partnership approaches, until one considers the final sentence of that paragraph which states ‘Democracy in schools also has pragmatic justifications: it is an effective way for creating a climate of confidence and responsibility within schools’. Hence, again partnership is being conceptualised in terms of accountability. That is not to deny that genuine partnership involves accountability on the part of all partners and, indeed, the reference to parental participation through ‘evaluation of their schools’ (p45) implies an insider role for parents that is in accordance with democratic perspectives. Nonetheless, the recurrence of accountability amid the omission of any discussion of other aspects of partnership suggests a more managerial than democratic construction of parent-teacher relationships.

It is notable that the ‘school/family relationships’ section of Parents as Partners in Education centres on the right of parents to information about the progress of their child. Some degree of an accountability discourse can be inferred from the statement that ‘parents have the right to be assured that the child’s needs are being met by the school’, albeit that the word ‘assured’ implies that these needs are being met. The sense of a concern with accountability is reinforced by the statement; ‘Parents, as a body, are also entitled to know whether the school and the education system are meeting children’s needs’. The specification that it is parents ‘as a body’ who are entitled to information on school performance challenges the notion that teachers are to be directly accountable to parents. Although the inferences to accountability are not particularly strong in the document, the document is
quite non-specific in nature (except regarding Parent Associations) and as noted in Section 4.2.2.4 it might have been concerned to avoid controversy. These considerations may amplify the significance of the insinuations of an accountability discourse.

With regard to managerial constructions, while it is apparent from Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life that it was written in a context where teacher accountability was increasing in importance, there is no mention of accountability in the parent-teacher relationship. Even in the section on the requirement to provide assessment information to parents, the notion that parents might use this to hold teachers accountable is notably absent. This may suggest that relationships are not being construed using a managerial model, or alternatively it might relate to an underplaying of teacher accountability as a strategic pragmatism to reduce teacher resistance to what was a controversial policy document. Widening the framing context to examine the developments that emerged in conjunction with Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life would indicate the latter, given that new procedures such as reporting standardised test results in aggregate form to the Department and the Board of Management (Circular 18/12) imply an awareness of the uses of accountability mechanisms in encouraging teacher and school compliance with Department directives. Widening the context further to include other procedural changes that arose from 2011 onwards (e.g. the emphasis on reporting to parents about adherence to Department policies to parents contained in Circular 08/11, Circular 65/11 and Circular 45/13) infers that teacher accountability to parents is of interest. It is difficult, therefore, to dismiss the possibility of managerial assumptions about parental involvement in the document, even if they cannot be directly identified from the text.

A lack of trust in teachers and schools permeates Education for Tomorrow, through references to audits, adherence to legislation, and the need for frequent reviews of school activities (pp. 9, 11, 19). Making teachers and schools accountable to other bodies is a theme of the document, and while some of the monitoring functions are delegated to other agencies (e.g. the Health and Safety Authority p9), rather than being directly the remit of parents, perhaps the emphasis on school and teacher accountability to these statutory bodies demonstrates all the more strongly the lack of trust implied in these recommendations. The accountability focus is particularly evident in the section entitled ‘Communicating’ (pp. 17-18) where the principle that ‘communication should be transparent and open at all levels’ is expanded in the form of a list of information that schools ‘must’ (eight uses) or ‘should’ (ten uses) provide to parents, and when and how this is to be provided. The use of modal verbs, as well as lending a tone of certainty to the list and excluding any consideration of the differing circumstances of schools, also serves to suggest that this information is not already being provided by schools. This again implies a sense of low trust between parents and teachers, symptomatic of managerialism.

The basic task of Supporting Each Other is to delineate roles for Parents’ Associations and principals so as to avoid ‘misunderstandings’ between them. There are undoubtedly practical reasons for this, and the document strives to create a positive and optimistic tone regarding parent-teacher
partnerships. Notwithstanding this the potential for conflict and low trust is assumed, which suggests at least an awareness of managerial constructions of parent-teacher relationships.

Arguably the disparity between the obvious promotion of an accountability discourse at European levels and its concealed nature in DES documents demonstrates how an overt accountability agenda is outside of the discursive limits of Irish education, at least for now. *Education for Tomorrow* ignores these discursive limits by openly displaying low trust for teachers; hence, its tone is very different from the other Irish discourse sources analysed.

**4.3.1.4. Financial efficiencies**

As mentioned in *Section 4.2.1.3*, a concern with the financial imperatives for increasing parental involvement in schools and education is not a strong theme in the documentation analysed. Nonetheless, aspects of a managerial discourse regarding financial matters can be identified in *How can we Make Schools Work Better?* (World Bank 2012) and *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* (OECD Working Papers No 73. 2012).

It must be borne in mind that *How can we Make Schools Work Better?* discusses a developing country (Indonesia) and is located in a context of scarce financial resources, as well as the economic interests of the World Bank itself. Nevertheless, the use of cost effectiveness and test score increase comparisons to decide on the relative merits of each of the interventions implemented during the project is conspicuous in the document, and seems indicative of a managerial approach to parental involvement, given managerial concerns with achieving financial efficiencies.

*Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* describes demands on parents to play a greater role in their children’s education as arising partially from ‘financial strains on education budgets’ (p13). While the document itself does not appear to be overly concerned with the financial implications of parental involvement, it would be naive to disregard the economic imperatives that influence OECD publications, given the economic remit of that body and, indeed, the word ‘economies’ in the document’s title reinforces this point. The second chapter of the document begins with reference to the purposes of education in terms of ‘efficiency and equity concerns’ that led to the creation of state-funded and compulsory education systems, with efficiency discussed with reference to the guaranteeing of an educated labour force ‘that would be an engine for economic growth’. Admittedly ‘equity’ concerns are also discussed, but it is debatable as to whether the equitable effects of parental involvement are valued for their own sake or as a means to ensure a stable basis for further economic growth. If the latter is the main motivation, then managerial constructions of the parent-teacher relationship remain pertinent.
4.3.2 Managerial presentations of parent-teacher power relations in the documents analysed

4.3.2.1 Parent empowerment in opposition to teacher empowerment

The positioning of parent power and teacher power as inversely related is a feature of managerial understandings of parent-teacher relationships, in that parent empowerment is seen to have a disempowering effect on teachers. While the parent empowerment aim of *Education for Tomorrow* (NPC-P 2010) does not itself necessarily imply a managerial approach to parent-teacher power relations, the tone of the document does. The presence of managerial constructions of parent-teacher power relations in Irish education can perhaps be detected from *Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997) albeit that the document itself does not advance them. Paradoxically, as discussed in Section 2.3.4.1, the degree to which parents are empowered in managerial constructions can often be quite limited, with parents only empowered to the extent that they further policymakers’ aims. Arguably this notion of limited parent empowerment can be interpreted from *European Report on the Quality of School Education: Sixteen Quality Indicators* (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture May 2000).

The empowerment of parents ‘to play an active part in their children’s education at every level of the education system’ (p3) is among the stated aims of the NPC-P. Accordingly the need for parents to be ‘truly supported, trained and empowered to participate in the governance of primary schools through the Board of Management’ (p20) is asserted in *Education for Tomorrow*. The involvement of the Parent Association in whole-school decision-making presumes a powerful role for it in the school (p20). The positioning of Parents’ Associations/NPC-P as an insider in school and educational policy-making is demonstrated and confirmed through the wide range of educational aspects commented on in the document, particularly those under the heading ‘effective school systems’ (pp 13-17). The objective of empowering parents does not of itself imply that teacher power is to be correspondingly reduced, as a dual empowerment approach, typical of democratic understandings of parent-teacher relations, could be envisaged. However, the absence of any discussion of issues of power in the relationship between parents and teachers makes it likely that the concept of dual empowerment was not deemed relevant to this vision of education.

Arguably inferences on power in the parent-teacher relationship are more easily drawn from the tone, rather than the content of *Education for Tomorrow*, with a ‘parents know best’ stance taken throughout. This is particularly relevant in the use of imperatives such as ‘must’ (c. forty times) and ‘should’ (c. thirty-two times), and the absence of mitigators, resulting in most recommendations being presented as absolute and non-negotiable, as well as being applicable to all settings. An almost dictatorial role for parents is implied, as there is no suggestion that teacher views or concerns have been taken into account, although this could indicate defensiveness based on the long exclusion of parent representatives from decision-making roles. References to research evidence (e.g. to the
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

‘McKinsey Report’) infer support for the policy positions adopted by the NPC-P, while the call for further research on which to base government policy implies that such policies are lacking this basis at present. The sense of certainty in the document and the absence of any complimentary comments on the role of teachers imply an oppositional stance among parents and teachers in relation to the knowledge and expertise of the other. For instance, while some of the recommendations in the document are very similar to INTO proposals (such as on class size and ICT, for example) there is no acknowledgement of concurrence between parent and teacher agendas. Whether this is due to a perceived struggle between parent and teacher arenas of knowledge, which would imply a managerial approach, or whether it is merely a stylistic issue, is of course debatable.

Managerial discourses of teacher professionalism and parent-teacher relationships are explicitly rejected by Possibilities for Partnership. It is apparent from the document, however, that discourses of parent empowerment were influencing perspectives on parent-teacher relations at the time it was written. For instance, much attention is paid to reassuring teachers that greater parental involvement in Irish education would not damage their professionalism and status, and on bolstering the notion of teacher professional knowledge. While presumably this is included to encourage teachers fearful of parental involvement to engage with it, that it was necessary to provide this reassurance indicates that the INTO were aware of, and sympathetic to, teacher concerns that parent empowerment would interfere with teachers’ professional domains and erode their professional status.

In Sixteen Quality Indicators, the question ‘In what respects might policy-makers wish to limit parental involvement as well as to increase them?’ (p 45) is posed. While as already noted this may imply a traditional view of parent-teacher relations, from a managerial perspective it may suggest that parents are to be powerful in the parent-teacher relationship, so long as that power is exercised in a way that does not threaten policy-makers’ objectives.

The contrast between parent and teacher discourses of parent empowerment, as exhibited by Education for Tomorrow and Possibilities for Partnership indicates that the power balance and the exercise of power is a possible point of tension within parent-teacher relationships.

4.3.2.2 Challenge to expertise of teachers, teacher as semi-professional/technocrat

Direct challenges to the expertise of teachers, or the positioning of teachers as semi-professionals were not found in the documents analysed, albeit this is unsurprising as explicitly undermining teacher professionalism is likely to be beyond the discursive limits of Irish education discourse. Few implicit challenges to teacher expertise were found in the documents either, although the comments of Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2012) about teacher education are interesting in this regard.

Whether deliberately or otherwise Education for Tomorrow creates the impression that teacher and principal education in Ireland is significantly inadequate at the present time. Ten bullet-point recommendations are made with regard to the need for changes in teacher selection, initial education,
continuing professional development and leadership education (pp. 13-14). While many of these recommendations are reasonable and, indeed, echo the recommendations of other bodies, the absence of any positive comments on teacher education implies a disparagement of teachers’ knowledge and expertise. The use of the term ‘training’ rather than ‘teacher education’ (p14) may imply a technicist rather than professional approach to teaching, although since ‘teacher training’ is a term in common parlance this may have been unintentional. The reference to the need for ‘compulsory training’ for principals infers that principals are not interested in enhancing their skills unless they are obliged to do so. Comments on the need for ‘rigorous assessment of suitability for teaching and working with children’ during the selection of student teachers, and the need for those selecting student teachers to ‘undergo specific relevant training’ (p14) insinuates a criticism of the calibre of student teachers. These aspects of the document infer that the notion of the teacher as educational expert is being challenged, and that an attempt being made to develop a role for the NPC-P in determining the format and content of teacher education.

4.3.2.3 Strong parent education model with deficit assumptions

A strong parent education model can be identified in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* (NCCA 2009). While a parent education model of itself would not necessarily challenge the democratic assumptions otherwise evident in the document, a critical reading of the document suggested features that were in accordance with managerial constructions of parent-teacher power relations. That parents need to be educated/informed of their responsibilities regarding their children’s learning is a core assumption in the references to parents in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES 2011). Both documents serve to place the idea that parents might not be involved in their children’s education outside the limits of acceptable discourse. Therefore, their emphasis on parent education, which could be evidence of a traditional compensatory approach to parental involvement, seems more in keeping with managerial constructions.

The use of bullet-points and bold print to highlight what the author deemed to be the most important points in the document demonstrates the educational intent of *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* itself. Each of the bullet-points, addressed to either parents or practitioners, take the form of precise directions, directly guiding the behaviour of the reader. The use of the present tense throughout the document implies a non-negotiable understanding of what good practice is, and creates a sense of pressure on the reader to comply, as it suggests that these practices are in operation at the present time. Everyday language that should be accessible to the majority of readers is used. A normative effect is achieved by the inclusion of ‘Learning Experiences’, describing the experiences and actions of ordinary parents and practitioners, with whom the reader would be likely to identify. Furthermore, the reflective questions, which are framed as if the reader asked them themselves, encourages the reader to internalise the points made and to apply those points to his/her practice.
That *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* is an educational instrument is not necessarily significant in terms of identifying underlying discourses, given that all texts seek to educate and influence to a degree. However, it has such a strong parent education model running through it that practitioners are construed as educators of parents as well as of young children. Attention, for instance, is paid to parents who need help interpreting report cards, workshops on children’s development or adult learning initiatives. A comprehensive list of parents for whom practitioner support is particularly important is provided (p7), although it is acknowledged that all parents will need support sometimes. There is little mention of parents who do not themselves need to be educated, (although two examples are provided of parents acting as educators of other parents). The examples of special skills or interests that parents might have and that the setting might benefit from are mostly of a non-academic, non-professional nature, although admittedly academic and professional skills are unlikely to be of much interest to very small children. It is interesting that, despite this parent education model, in the ‘tips for parents’ sections provided throughout the document there is no direct encouragement for parents to attend adult education classes, or improve their literacy skills, or look for support themselves. Instead the education of parents is envisaged as occurring through the actions of the childcare providers, which has the effect of passivizing parents. Undeniably the parent education model has laudable aims, and fits with democratic constructions of the school/early childhood setting being a capacity builder and source of mutual support, as well as linking with discourses of equality and inclusion. Despite this, however, the passive construction of parents as recipients of practitioner determined education suggests a managerial construction. It also positions the practitioner in the role of powerful expert with regard to the needs of parents.

A consideration of the ‘Learning Experiences’ sections of *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* makes managerial construction all the more likely in terms of the positioning of parents as subjects to be educated. Each of the ‘Learning Experiences’ text boxes has a reference to the aims and goals of the *Aistear* curriculum framework, but in some of the ‘Learning Experiences’ (e.g. Learning Experiences 4, 9, 10) it is the parents, rather than the children, to whom these aims and goals are being applied. In many of the ‘Learning Experiences’ parents are nervous, need to be reminded of contact times regularly, need to be educated and given easy-to-read books. While the ‘Learning Experiences’ provide examples of how practitioners can attend to the real needs of parents, and in all of the cases parents benefitted, it seems somewhat disrespectful of parents to be applying the goals and aims of an early childhood curriculum framework to them. The goals are referred to by the numbers of the aims and learning goals rather than being written out fully, so the reader has to find them elsewhere in the *Aistear* documentation if they are not familiar with the curriculum framework. As practitioners are far more likely to be familiar with the specific goals than are parents, it can be argued that the parent education aims are being concealed to some extent from parents, despite the document being ostensibly directed at parents as well as practitioners.
The strength of the parent education model that recurs throughout Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners casts some doubt on the ‘insider’ positioning of parents that was apparent from the initial reading also. Despite the inclusion of sections specifically addressed to parents, arguably parents are more talked about than talked to in the document. Parents are the subject of more sentences than are practitioners and all the questions in the ‘Learning Experiences’ subsections are addressed to practitioners rather than parents. This contributes to a sense of parents being the subjects of practitioners’ actions, rather than being genuinely active partners in the setting, and as such provides a challenge to the notion of democratic power relations that the document is ostensibly trying to foster.

It is striking that Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners makes no reference to the financial aspects of accessing early childhood education and care in Ireland. While the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme provides a certain limited level of early childhood care for all pre-school children, for many parents this is inadequate and they pay privately for much of the care and education provided to their pre-school children. Even in ‘Learning Experience 12’ (p24), where parents are choosing a setting for their one-year old child, the document makes no mention of financial issues. This is a very significant omission, given that the amount of money they are paying is likely to influence parents’ interaction with the setting. Possibly a discussion of financial imperatives would have soured the optimistic tone that the document is seeking to create, and a desire not to introduce such considerations into the discussion of partnership might explain the omission. Alternatively, however, the absence of any comment on financial matters may also suggest that this document is primarily envisaging publicly funded or community-based settings as the location for its recommendations, albeit the Aistear curriculum framework applies to the entire 0-6 sector and some of the ‘Learning Experiences’ are clearly located in privately funded settings (e.g. ‘Liz’s home’, p24). A focus on publicly funded settings would imply a different definition of ‘parents’, given that educated middle-class parents are much less likely to access these settings than parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This raises the possibility of a deficit approach to parental involvement, where parental involvement in educational settings is seen as a way of compensating for parental limitations.

The major supposition of the chapter ‘Enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development’ in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life, is that parents need to be informed about the activities they should undertake or avoid in order to support the literacy and numeracy development of their children. Hence, parent knowledge is construed in terms of a deficit. Despite the references made to parent empowerment and enablement, parents are envisaged only as being involved in the education of their own child, with involvement outside of that role not relevant for the purposes of the strategy. There is no mention of any parent input or insight into the decision-making process in relation to children’s learning, and it is assumed that the necessary decisions will be made by school staff, who will then inform the parents of how best to support their implementation. While there is a vague reference to parents having ‘much to offer schools’ (p19), and
the need to ensure that relevant information is passed from home to various education settings is mentioned (p24), the possibility that parents have relevant information to share with the school about their child’s learning seems backgrounded. For instance, it is the DES rather than parents that are listed as having responsibility for ensuring that relevant information is transferred between educational settings (p24). While undoubtedly the DES does have a role in ensuring that the relevant procedures for information transfer are in place, this suggests that parents would not know the information to share without a formal process being in place. The level of detail provided about the ‘national public information campaign’ (p22) for parents, and its first place positioning in the list of actions is notable. Undoubtedly it is important to provide information and support to parents, and Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life can be read as seeking to promote commendable aims of equality and inclusion. Nonetheless, the assumption of parental deficits in terms of their support for their children’s education is in accordance with managerial constructions of the parent education model.

Although a parent education model characteristic of managerialism was only clearly evident in two of the documentary sources analysed, both of the documents are highly influential in Irish education at the present time.

4.3.2.4 Market models of schooling

While none of the documents analysed explicitly justified parental involvement in terms of parental choice of school, parental involvement appears to be conceptualised mainly in terms of school choice in Statement of Strategy (DES 2011). School choice forms part of the rationale for the existence of the Educate Together movement, as is evident from Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values. Arguably an interest in placing schools in competition to each other can be inferred from Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011) despite the document’s denials. The interest in aligning the school with powerful interests apparent in Sixteen Quality Indicators (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture May 2000) might be associated with managerial perspectives, as might the reference to school handbooks in Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010), albeit the latter is a very minor observation.

Where parents are mentioned in the DES’s Statement of Strategy, it is in the context of school choice. References to increased inspection ‘coverage’ and improved reporting to school communities (p7), indicate an interest in providing information to parents so they can more easily make choices about the schools they send their children to, and assumes that this will enhance educational provision. The connection between information provision and school choice is made especially clearly in the Programme for Government (which is appended to the Strategy document and from which it arose) where the inspection of schools, school publication of annual reports and five year development plans, and year-on-year evaluation of schools is explicitly linked to the intention of giving parents more information on which to base their choice of school for their children (p18). That there are no references to parents or parental involvement except in regard to these requirements makes the
positioning of parents as recipients of school accountability all the more indicative of a market model of schooling; hence, managerial discourses are influential.

The importance of parental choice of school is a recurrent theme throughout Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values. School choice is presented as a human right, guaranteed under both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Bunreacht na hÉireann. The development of the Educate Together movement is described as ‘a distinctive response to the growing demand for such an option within the Irish educational system’. Citing such respected documents gives legitimacy to the Educate Together stance. Through its commitment to supporting parents who want to establish new schools, and to promoting awareness of the multi-denominational sector, the document positions Educate Together as the organisation through which parent choice of school will be achieved in Irish education. This argumentation strategy of rights and responsibilities serves to make the case for Educate Together powerfully. While an emphasis on parent choice of school is characteristic of managerial discourses of parent-teacher relations, the particular history of the Educate Together movement, and the limited choice of primary education provision in Ireland is likely to influence the concern about school choice that is expressed in this document as well.

In keeping with managerial approaches to school provision, a concern with public relations can be detected in the implicit favourable comparison of Educate Together schools with other schools in the system that is made throughout Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values. For instance, the positive descriptions of the work of Educate Together schools, such as ‘enabling and supporting each child to achieve their full potential while at the same time becoming caring and active members of a culturally diverse society’, ‘an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect’, and ‘an excellent education that is inclusive of all’, infers that schools of other patronage do not have values such as these or are not as efficient in achieving them. The claim that ‘many parents have a valid preference for schools in which boys and girls of all social, cultural and religious background can be educated together in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect’, while probably accurate in terms of describing what parents want, implies that parents cannot achieve this preference except in an Educate Together school. Arguably this hints that other schools are inferior to Educate Together ones. Similarly, the motto ‘No Child an Outsider’ insinuates that in other schools some children are outsiders, while the commitment to support the establishment of schools that are ‘child-centred in nature’ may suggest that existing schools are not child-centred, despite the provisions of the child-centred curriculum which apply to all state funded schools. Attention to competing with other schools and to addressing public relations aspects seems to indicate the influence of managerial discourses of parent-teacher relations, albeit that this competitive positioning of Educate Together schools may also relate to its efforts to establish itself as a legitimate education provider in the Irish education system. Notably, however, the Educate Together representative interviewed rejected this interpretation of rivalry, explaining that no criticism is intended of other schools in its documentation.
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life explicitly rejected the notion of formulating league tables or placing schools in competition to each other (p79). Nonetheless, the inclusion of the reporting of assessment data to parents (p77) and the creation of a centralised national data-base of assessment results (p79) among the strategies to improve literacy and numeracy, insinuates that a market model of schooling is perceived as a means to increase attainments. This point is all the more relevant when the ‘Schools like Ours’ proposal (that sought a mechanism for comparing schools, although it denied a competitive focus) which was present in the draft version of the plan, but removed in its direct form after the submission process (p83), is considered, as the underlying principles of both the draft and the finalised version of the plan are likely to have been the same. Widening the framing context further to consider the Programme for Government from which this plan emerged makes managerial assumptions regarding the justification for increasing parental involvement in schools all the more likely to be present.

An interest in aligning the school with powerful interests is apparent in Sixteen Quality Indicators. For instance, the benefits that people ‘with business experience and connections’ (p45) can bring to the school are commented upon, while parents are described as ‘a valuable resource and potentially powerful allies for schools’ (p45). This may well be in accordance with the assets of the community approach that is symptomatic of democratic approaches to parent-teacher relations. Alternatively, however it can be construed as pertaining to the need for schools to gain a competitive edge over each other in market models of schooling as well as raising the possibility that some parents are likely to exercise more power in the school and are likely to be seen as more valuable to the school than others. This would be characteristic of managerial constructions of parent-teacher power relations.

Parent choice of school is a longstanding feature of Irish primary education. That it is now being used as a rationale for parental involvement indicates a discursive shift that is significant when examining the influence of managerial discourses on parent-teacher relations.

4.3.2.5 Parents’ rights agenda

The parents’ rights agenda, particularly evident in Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe (EPA 2008) presents a conundrum in terms of distinguishing between managerial and democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations.

Parents are powerfully positioned in the Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe, with the importance of the parental role being seen as the source and justification of their power. The listing of a wide-ranging set of rights of parents demonstrates how this parental power might apply in action in schools. The list of parent rights is interlaced with a list of parents’ responsibilities. A trenchant rights-based approach to parental involvement, especially without any comment on teacher rights, would be likely to challenge teacher power in schools. The listing of rights and responsibilities in charter form seems to reflect managerial approaches to education where
everything is made measurable and accountability is prioritised. However, the rights and responsibilities themselves do not conflict with democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations and, indeed, they imply an active, reciprocal and insider positioning for parents that is in accordance with democratic understandings. Hence, the document can be interpreted both from managerial and democratic perspectives.

4.3.3 Managerial assumptions about the implementation of parental involvement in education in the documents analysed

4.3.3.1 De-centralisation, site-based management structures

*How can we Make Schools Work Better?* (World Bank 2012) describes the de-centralisation of school governance structures for school improvement purposes, while parental involvement in site-based management structures is foregrounded in *Sixteen Quality Indicators* (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture May 2000). In the Irish context, given the longstanding local management structures and relative autonomy of each school, de-centralisation of school governance has not been as relevant a topic as in other countries, nor can it easily be attributed to managerial influences. An interest in de-centralisation in keeping with managerial approaches can, however, be inferred from the *Programme for Government* attached to the *Statement of Strategy* (DES 2011).

The underlying assumption of *How can we Make Schools Work Better?* is that increasing the role and activity of local governance committees encourages teachers to work harder, resulting in better school outcomes. The project was grounded in the 2002 provisions for school committees in Indonesia which gave these committees specific functions regarding budgeting, teacher qualifications and facilities. This strategy supposes that greater accountability will improve teachers’ work rates and, consequently, that teachers have the capacity to work harder and that their present work is not adequate. It does not suggest a high level of trust in teachers. It is notable that the success of the ‘linkage’ intervention during the project was attributed to teachers working harder because they perceived that the committee’s power had increased and that the committees had gained ‘extra legitimacy’ (p4). However, the committees continued to operate under the same conditions as they had since 2002, albeit that some of them had become more active as a result of the project (p4). The perceptions as well as the actuality of power relations are seen to be relevant, therefore, which is an example of the constitutive power of discourse.

Admittedly the question ‘So what’s the best way to encourage successful accountability that helps ensure students get the teachers, the supplies and the schools they deserve?’ (p1) is discussed in *How can we Make Schools Work Better?* with specific reference to Indonesia, where the challenges facing its school system are very different from those of more privileged countries such as Ireland. Nonetheless, discourse emanating from the World Bank is likely to have an impact given its international status and, indeed, the introduction to the article describes the question ‘How can we
make schools work better?’ as one that is being asked ‘around the world’ (p1), thereby implying that this managerial construction of parent-teacher relations is generalisable. That the World Bank has published an online toolbox for the implementation of school-based management educational reforms also indicates the international nature of its influence.

Site-based management structures for parental involvement are foregrounded in *Sixteen Quality Indicators* by the inclusion of a map showing the different rights of parents on school boards in Europe and by the placing of ‘statutory advisory and decision-making bodies’ first in the list of various types of parental involvement that can occur in schools. Given the shortness of the text involved, however, and since reference is also made to the involvement of wider groups of parents at school and classroom level, it is debatable whether this indicates a managerial approach to the implementation of parental involvement or not.

The international interest in the devolution of decision-making responsibility (and culpability) from the State to school, in the expectation that this will raise educational standards, is a theme echoed in the *Programme for Government*. It explicitly commits that greater ‘freedom and autonomy’ will be given to principals and Boards of Management ‘by devolving more responsibility locally, with greater freedom to allocate and manage staff with required flexibility and to delegate management responsibilities to teachers as school priorities require’. No mention is made of the longstanding existing ‘freedom and autonomy’ (at least in theory) that Boards of Management of Irish primary schools have, which presents this reform as more radical than it actually is. Similarly, the commitment to allow for the devolution of management responsibilities to teachers is not located in the context of the extensive middle management structures that used to exist in Irish schools up until *Circular 22/2009* (which in effect began the process of dismantling them), and so this idea is less novel than might be assumed from reading the document. Nonetheless, it indicates managerial approaches to educational management.

The re-interpretation of the longstanding local management of Irish primary schools to suit managerial priorities is again notable in terms of illustrating a discursive shift towards managerial approaches, perhaps inspired by managerial assumptions about parent-teacher relations in international documentation.

4.3.3.2. Centralised legislative approach to the implementation of parental involvement

The paradox that de-centralisation is often accompanied by an interest in re-centralisation in managerial constructions of educational provision is difficult to explore in Ireland given its historically devolved school management structures. However, a managerial concern with mandating and standardising approaches to parental involvement can be inferred from *Education for Tomorrow* (NPC-P 2010) and *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES 2011). More tentatively elements of managerial understandings in relation to the legislation of parental involvement can be perceived in *Statement of Strategy* (DES 2011) and *Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership*
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

(INTO 1997) although the latter may have been for pragmatic rather than discursive reasons. The quantifiable nature of the actions foregrounded in Parents as Partners in Education (DES 1991) possibly suggests some degree of a managerial approach to parental involvement. Measurable and visible forms of parental involvement are easier to legislate for and standardise than other types, and so the focus of Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies (OECD Working Papers, No 73. 2012) on quantifiable forms of involvement seems relevant from a managerial perspective.

Quite a legalistic and centralised approach is taken to parental involvement in Education for Tomorrow, although given that this is a NPC-P publication it is little wonder that parental involvement is framed in terms of formal structures. The recurrence of ‘must’ statements in relation to school obligations is notable, as is the disregarding of the (at least partially) autonomous nature of Irish primary schools, evident in the one-size-fits-all degree of specification with regard to issues such as school handbooks (p17) or the frequency and format of parent-teacher meetings (p18). The references made to Bunreacht na hÉireann (p7), Health and Safety legislation (p9) and particularly to the Education Act 1998 serve to make a connection between parental involvement and the legal obligations of schools. In line with the legislative approach, there is little recognition of the benefits of genuine commitment on the part of parents and teachers towards improving relationships with each other. This is demonstrated even in the style of the document itself, which is in no way conciliatory towards teachers, and lists school obligations without any corresponding reference to parent responsibilities. In the section on volunteering, (p19) where some mention of interpersonal relationships might be expected, none are found, although there are references made to volunteer welfare. The absence of any discussion of ‘softer’ aspects of the parent-teacher relationship in favour of making specific recommendations in a quantifiable form suggests a mandated approach to parental involvement characteristic of managerial understandings of the parent-teacher relationship.

Much of the decisions to be made in schools in response to the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life are already taken for granted within it, allowing limited scope for decision-making at school level. In excluding both parents and teachers from decision-making regarding these aspects of school life, a top-down approach to policy-making can be identified. For example, the document frames the problem of and the solution to parental involvement in literacy and numeracy as being that parents do not know how to help their children, and that parents, therefore, need information from the school to enable them to support their children’s literacy and numeracy attainments. There is no scope for parents or teachers to problematise other aspects of parental involvement that may be relevant to literacy and numeracy attainment. The vision of appropriate parental involvement presented is non-negotiable, and total certainty that this is the correct course of action in relation to ‘enabling parents’ is illustrated in the use of declaratives and in the absence of mitigation in the phrasing of sentences. The use of ‘we’ may refer to ‘we everyone’, and so attempt to achieve co-operation by including everyone, or may refer to ‘we the experts’, thereby appealing to authority. This leaves little space for
disagreement or argument, and creates a very directive tone in the document. The directive tone is supported by the use of bullet-points and the action plan layout, as well as the seven side bar comments in italics that synopsis each sub-paragraph, thereby focussing the attention of the reader on what the authors deemed to be the most important points of the text. Incidentally, the document is noticeably more precise in relation to the actions required from school staff than it is in relation to those required of the DES or Department of Children. The effect is also normative, creating a sense that this is the truth of how parents will need to become involved in their children’s education. The decreeing of specific actions that are to be taken in order to enable parents to become involved clearly locates parental involvement as a subject for legislation and, indeed, the strategy can itself perhaps be viewed as a piece of legislation, given the authority the DES has over schools. A managerial view is taken of parental involvement in whole-school decision-making, therefore.

In conjunction with this legislative approach in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* is a concern with forms of parental involvement that are ‘real, measurable and positive’ (p21). Indeed, the collocation of ‘real’ and ‘measurable’ suggests that any educational change has to be ‘measurable’ if it is to be ‘real’. The use of words such as ‘real’ and ‘meaningful’, as well as pushing for tangible forms of parental involvement, imply that parental involvement in the past was neither real nor meaningful. The phrasing of some of the objectives places more emphasis on their quantifiability than their effects. For instance, the goal which instructs schools to ‘ensure that parental engagement in children’s learning is integrated into each school’s School Improvement Plan’ (p23) focuses on the more easily monitored aspect (the School Improvement Plan) while the descriptions of actual parental involvement that this would require seem to be placed secondary to it. Interventions that ‘have been evaluated and proven to be effective’, (p 24) are prioritised under the strategy. The connection made between evaluation and effectiveness again highlights the importance of measurability. Arguably it is over-simplistic to imagine that the process of parent-teacher relations can be ‘proven’ to be effective, at least in the democratic understanding of them, but this is not a concern of the strategy.

A rather universal view of the school system underpins *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, as there is no reference to schools/teachers/parents for which the recommendations of the strategy might be superfluous. A degree of centralisation is evident in that all of the actions outlined are to apply to all settings, (apart from those limited to schools in the DEIS/HSCL programmes), and responsibility for many of the actions are assigned to agencies external to the school, such as the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and the DES. Indeed, ‘school staffs, boards of management and parents’ associations’ are only listed twice in the ‘responsible for this action’ column in the chapter. The recommendation that there needs to be a better co-ordination of the educational services that are provided in local communities is also typical of a managerialist concern with centralisation, financial efficiency and ensuring that government objectives are being implemented. In the document the described ‘variability’ in services is used as a euphemism for poor standards, in contrast to ‘excellence’ (p20). The characteristic managerial concern that a lack of co-ordination
results in ‘duplication’ or ‘neglect’, and is ‘not enabling us to get the best outcomes for the resources we have’, is to be addressed by a process of evaluation, to prioritise initiatives that make ‘a real, measurable and positive difference’ (p21). While understandable, especially in a time of economic difficulty such as when this strategy was published, the targeting of what’s ‘proven to work’ (p21) may narrow local provision, as well as reducing decision-making scope at local level, despite the terminology of parent and community ‘enabling’ that has prominence in the document.

The commitment in the DES’s Statement of Strategy to ‘policy and legislative development to support the effective governance, management and operation of schools, including the involvement of parents and learners’ (p7) is the only reference in the document to the role of parents in school management structures. This suggests a mandated view of parental involvement. However, this can only be a very tentative inference, given the paucity of the reference.

The recurring call in Possibilities for Partnership for the DES to provide guidelines in relation to a variety of aspects of parental involvement suggests some degree of a legislative approach to the topic. For instance, the DES is asked to prepare guidelines in relation to the promotion and development of good home-school relations, guidelines on operational relations and communication procedures between Boards of Management, teaching staff and Parents’ Association, guidelines on homework, and reference is made to the ‘promised legislation’ that became the 1998 Education Act. There is also reference to various policies that schools need to devise, (pp. 112-118), although the specification of school devised policies implies a less centralised approach. Since the impression is given in the document that the exclusion of parents from schools in the past may at least in part have been due to an absence of guidelines in these areas, the assumption is that parental involvement can be mandated, implying a managerial approach to parental involvement. However, pragmatic as well as discursive reasons may have influenced this argument, in that blaming the DES for a lack of relevant policies and, therefore, a lack of parental involvement serves to remove blame from teachers, which is likely to be in accordance with the INTO’s objectives.

As noted in Section 4.2.3.2, the establishment of Parents’ Associations in primary schools is the main focus of Parents as Partners in Education. Given the general title of the document it might be expected that procedures for enhancing communication between parents or teachers or encouraging parental involvement in the education of their children would be discussed, but these are backgrounded in comparison with the emphasis placed on Parent Associations. The only other directly specified action of schools is the formulation of a ‘clearly defined policy for parental involvement’. Since both of these actions involve increasing the visibility and measurability of parental involvement in schools they may indicate some degree of a managerial approach towards parent-teacher relations.

With regard to measurability, PISA data is clearly foregrounded in Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies as is evident from the descriptor ‘PISA Countries’. Admittedly the concern with PISA is unsurprising given that it is an OECD publication. The line ‘some parents may be more effective in their involvement, such as parents who read to their children
in the language of the PISA test, as opposed to another language’ (p44) is particularly interesting. It infers that reading to children in other languages is not effective parental involvement, as it will not help them in the PISA test. This indicates the degree to which PISA is seen as being of crucial importance in education systems. Similarly, the references to performance (p44), while seeming to refer to performance in the PISA test, do not specify this, so PISA performance is being used as a proxy for performance more generally. The document is providing a way to measure, compare and evaluate parental involvement in their children’s education. One effect of using PISA data in this way is to standardise notions of ‘effective parental involvement’ internationally; hence, managerial discourses are likely to be influential in the document.

The paradox of de-centralisation/re-centralisation is particularly sharp when parental involvement is examined, given that increasing parental involvement at school level requires a de-centralisation of decision-making, and so a concern with re-centralisation appears contradictory. A concern with re-centralisation was not widely found in the Irish documents analysed, but that it was found in DES documentation is significant.

4.3.3.3 Individualised approach

The understanding that parents are in competition with each other to access the best educational experience for their children was not strongly apparent in any of the documents analysed. Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009) focusses on the individual involvement of parents in the educational experience of their own children somewhat to the exclusion of collective involvement for the common good, which might indicate a degree of managerial influence. However, the structure of the early childhood education and care settings that the document addresses is probably more influential to this individualised approach than discursive assumptions. While parental involvement is envisaged in individual terms in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011) this does not necessarily indicate managerial approaches, as the focus of that document is on the academic attainments of children, and on parents helping their own children, rather than on parental involvement in schools more generally.

Despite the strong emphasis on parental involvement, parent-practitioner partnership, and the need for joint endeavour in decision-making in relation to the individual child, whole-school/setting decision-making involvement by parents is not a strong theme of Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners. The use of ‘between’ in the title implies a partnership between two people (parent and practitioner) rather than partnership more generally. When reference is made to school management structures at the end of the document, the conditional tense is used, in contrast to the present tense used elsewhere. While the reflective questions in this section encourage parents to become involved in Boards of Management, this encouragement is not enforced through the ‘Learning Experiences’, unlike the other themes. This has the effect of making collective parental involvement seem less important than other forms of involvement discussed in the document. ‘Learning Experience
10’ shows Parent Association members having some influence in the setting, but this influence is in relation to supporting another parent, and relates to a peripheral aspect (playground building) rather than a core concern of the school. The side-lining of involvement at the whole-school level can perhaps be explained due to the focus of the document on individual parent-teacher relations, as well as the irrelevance of BOM/PA style management structures for many private suppliers of early childhood education. Despite this, however, the near omission of whole-school or collective forms of involvement raises the possibility of managerial constructions of parental involvement being present in the document, if the certain tone of the document implies that there is no need for parents to become involved in school decision-making, as long as the school/setting follows the requirements of *Aistear*.

4.3.3.4 Adversarial democracy assumed

Democracy itself, and the implementation of democratic procedures in schools, were not deconstructed in any of the documents analysed, most of which seemed to envisage ‘democracy’ in adversarial terms. However, given the prevalence of this concept of democracy in everyday life it is difficult to draw any inferences about the discourses that underlie the assumption that parental involvement in schools or policy-making will be based on adversarial democratic procedures. Arguably it is more useful to look for the presence of elements of deliberative democracy as evidence of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations, rather than making any claims about its absence. Nonetheless, the silence of *Education for Tomorrow* on the topic of parent representativeness is notable. The possible backgrounding of the role of the Board of Management in favour of emphasising the role of the principal in the *Programme for Government* appended to *Statement of Strategy* (DES 2011) is also relevant regarding parent representativeness and managerial constructions.

As might be expected from an NPC-P document, *Education for Tomorrow* centres the role of the NPC-P when discussing parental involvement in schools. This is demonstrated by the use of ‘through NPC’ in the statement that ‘Parents, through the NPC must be a partner in the decision-making process at a local, regional and national level’ (p20). Similarly, the reference to ‘a partner’ rather than ‘partners’, despite the latter corresponding better with the plural ‘parents’, focuses attention on the NPC-P as the representative body for parents in Irish education. Although it is stated that ‘All selection and recruitment of parent representatives within the primary system must be done in an open and transparent way in consultation with the parent body of the school’ (p20), no reference is made to those parents who may not feel represented by NPC-P. Rather it is confidently asserted that ‘when NPC speaks on behalf of parents it can do so knowing that the issues have been considered and debated by its members’ (p5). While such statements are understandable in an NPC-P publication, they seem to ignore literature findings regarding certain parents’ reluctance to become involved in Parent Associations (cf. Brook & Hancock 2000:262). The use of the words ‘selection’, ‘recruitment’ and ‘consultation’ when discussing parent representatives in the school is interesting. In some respects
they seem quite vague in comparison with other terms that could have been used to describe parental choice of representatives such as ‘election’. On the contrary, however, while ‘election’ is a term firmly in the realm of adversarial democracy, arguably ‘consultation’ does raise the possibility of more deliberative processes being employed. It is unclear whether the ‘consultation’ relates to consultation about the procedures to be used in selecting representatives or to consultation during the actual selection process itself, so if deliberative democracy is implied by the use of the term ‘consultation’ it is not clear how far it extends. Admittedly the representativeness or otherwise of the NPC-P is an internal matter not likely to be discussed in a public document and so it is difficult to draw inferences from its omission from Education for Tomorrow.

Despite the interest in devolution of responsibility from national to school level expressed in the Programme for Government arguably this devolution is envisaged as affecting principals more than Boards of Management. Little mention is made of increasing the particular role of parents in school management structures. The ordering of information in the comments made about the ‘freedom and autonomy’ to be given to schools is notable, in that the principal is located before Board of Management, and it is stated that ‘responsibility for achieving these outcomes is to be vested in the school principals’. Irish education policy documents usually give prominence to the Board of Management, who then delegate responsibilities to the principal, rather than vice versa, and emphasising the role of the principal over that of the Board of Management may imply a lesser role for Board of Management members, including the parent members. This point is all the more relevant if the contextual frame is widened to include the Boards of Management of National Schools, Constitution and Rules of Procedure 2011, (published since the Programme for Government). In it the terminology of ‘parent representatives’ on Boards of Management (in use in 2007) was changed to ‘parent nominee’ (p32), and it included a new note stating that ‘Board members are not delegates of their electorates’ (p19), although the Board of Management constitution does emphasise the importance of frequent communication with parents and others in the school community. There is a sense, however, that parental involvement in school management structures is being constrained even as it is being encouraged.

4.3.4 Managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations discussed in the interviews

4.3.4.1 Interview with senior INTO official

Managers.
Given the ubiquitous nature of managerial terminology, it is perhaps unsurprisingly that instances of it were identified in the INTO interview transcript. For example, the remark that Irish education cannot ‘rest on its laurels’ despite its successes for fear of being passed out by other economies is suggestive of discourses of globalised competition. Similarly, the comment on how parents have a right to information from professionals in terms of ‘delivery of public services that you keep the user informed’ (sic), infers managerial assumptions in the conceptualisation of parents as ‘users’ of education, in relation to the teacher accountability dimensions of parental involvement, and in the idea that education can be ‘delivered’. However, the interviewee did clarify that he was using the term ‘user’ loosely which indicated his discomfort with the term. Indeed, these instances are more of interest as examples of how managerial terminology permeates educational discourse, even in accounts that reject it, rather than being of themselves discursively significant regarding the interviewee’s assumptions.

The interviewee addressed the subject of fundraising at length. His explanation of how staffing cutbacks can have more serious consequences for schools than funding cutbacks because ‘parents will make up some of the shortfall’ in the case of the latter, raises the possibility of schools being dependent on parents. This may increase the likelihood of managerial discourses of parent-teacher relations taking root in terms of impression management. The interviewee was quite specific that ‘if parents send in significant amounts of money they’re entitled to know exactly where it went to and who’s in control of it and who decided and why this was decided and also then to have their own views taken into account’. Financial accountability and prudence are indisputably important in schools. Nevertheless, the notion that parents are entitled to a say in the school by virtue of their financial contribution seems to accord with a managerial understanding that some parents are more useful to the school than others, albeit the implications of a transactional style relationship were not alluded to by the interviewee who used the term ‘parent’ generically. The comments about the need for transparency, audited annual accounts and the use of a ‘Statler and Waldorf2 …. where one feeds off the other’ analogy to explain how easily rumours of financial impropriety can develop, hints at greater levels of mistrust among parents for schools than perhaps the interviewee was prepared to directly admit. Notably, however, the timing of the interview in a week when the INTO was considering strike action in response to government proposals to reduce teacher pay is likely to have heightened the emphasis the placed on financial matters during the interview. Immediate practicalities may, therefore, have influenced the interviewee as much as managerial assumptions regarding the financial effects of parental involvement.

A transactional or earned justification for parental involvement in schools might also be inferred from the interviewee’s comments that ‘we’ (presumably teachers and society more generally, although it was not specified), owe a debt to Irish parents because of their ‘great respect and grá for

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2 Two disagreeable old men puppet characters from the television show The Muppets.
education’. While in general terms this appreciation of the valuing of education in Irish society is in accordance with holistic and democratic discourses of education, it could be problematic if applied to parents more specifically. It raises the possibility that those parents who respect education (or are seen to respect it on the school’s terms) are more deserving of inclusion in schools than those who do not, and so may indicate managerial approaches where some parents are construed as assets to schools and others are not. The interviewee did not elaborate beyond the general value of Irish people prizing education, however, and so it may be unfair to interpret a transactional stance from these comments.

The interviewee’s description of primary school provision as ‘the nearest you’ll get to a market place ever’ is notable in terms of an identification of managerial features in Irish education, even if this form of provision pre-dates managerialism itself. The idea that the ‘market’ contributes to a surveillance mind-set was evoked in the description of how schools ‘watch every move that local schools are making’. The phrase ‘we do compete for pupils something terrible you know’ seemed to be uttered with resigned acceptance rather than actual disapproval of the existence of this market. The implication was that a ‘market’ is unavoidable given that Irish schools are ‘privately owned and privately run’. The interest with public relations that recurred throughout the interview can be regarded as symptomatic of two discourse approaches; the enhancement of the attractiveness of the school in a competitive environment as in a managerial model, but also in a more democratic sense in terms of the building of high trust and good relationships between parents and teachers. While the interviewee did not draw attention to any incompatibility between these two motivations, it does raise questions as to whether highly trusting relationships can be developed if inter-school competition and impression management are also significant concerns for schools and teachers.

Power imbalances in parent-teacher relationships at school level were mentioned when the interviewee discussed the very significant power some parents can have in cases where the removal of children from a school is likely to adversely affect that school’s staffing quota. This applies particularly to small schools and to parents with a number of children in the school. The comment that ‘and parents know what the staffing schedule is now because it has become a political football …. Mrs Murphy who has four kids she’s suddenly a big voter you know’ hints at the possibility of low trust in the relationship between parents and teachers, where parents exercise leverage on the school when they know they are in a powerful position. It also raises the possibility of power imbalances within the parent body, if some parents (e.g. those with bigger families, or who are deemed more likely to leave the school) are regarded as more important to the school than others. The interviewee detailed positive ways that teachers and principals try to attract and retain pupils, but did not comment on the negative potential consequences of trying to please certain parents, and the implications this might have for parent-teacher relations, or for the welfare of the pupil population generally. The capacity of parents in certain competitive circumstances to exert a direct influence on school priorities and decisions positions them powerfully, and seems characteristic of managerial approaches to parent-teacher
relations, even if the limitations found in the literature regarding parental power of exit cannot be ignored (cf. Vincent 1993).

The need for DES guidelines, financial support, and teacher education to support greater parental involvement that was found in *Possibilities for Partnership* was not echoed in the interview, perhaps in keeping with the overall argument that parental involvement in schools is now satisfactory, and that, therefore, such DES interventions are no longer needed. The introduction of the *1998 Education Act* in the intervening period may have satisfied some INTO requirements in terms of legislation, although this was not referred to by the interviewee. The interviewee did not call for additional allowances for teachers as *Possibilities for Partnership* did, but such a call would likely have futile and appear self-serving given the economic context at the time of the interview.

According to the interviewee, Irish education policy-making has generally proceeded on a consultative basis, where the voice of the teacher is heard at every level of the system, and he provided the example of how the Primary Curriculum has been accepted and stood the test of time as evidence of the benefits of such processes, although he acknowledged their time-consuming nature. Interestingly, however, he contrasted such a consultative process with the process involved in the proposed Junior Certificate reform (ongoing at the time of the interview) noting that teachers felt their voices had not been heard in that process. His comment that this ‘would be a bit of a shock in Irish education’ may be noteworthy in terms of identifying possible changes in policy-making approaches in recent years. However, while the INTO respondent seemed to be providing this as an example of less consultative decision-making processes, the NPC-P respondent had a different perspective on it, as she cited Junior Cycle reform as an area on which the DES and NPC-P had worked closely together. Rather then than there being less consultation, it seems that power relations in the consultation process may have changed, in favour of parents and to the detriment of teachers. Minister Quinn’s comments to a mainly parent audience at the NPC National Conference in June 2014, when he stated adamantly that Junior Certificate reforms would be achieved regardless of teacher opposition to them, are relevant also when this point is being considered. While the greater attention being paid to parent opinions might be characteristic of an interest in parent empowerment in a democratic sense, it also demonstrates a use of the power of the parent body on the part of the DES, and so may indicate a managerial approach to policy-making.

Although the INTO interviewee did not advocate a managerial construction of parent-teacher relations, his account points to aspects of the Irish education system where managerial approaches to parent-teacher relations are likely to be influential.

*4.3.4.2 Interview with senior IPPN official*

Managerial constructions were not identified in *Supporting Each Other*, except that its assumption that parent-teacher conflict was likely unless Parents’ Associations were tightly regulated demonstrated a managerial positioning of parents and teachers, by inferring relationships of low trust.
A similar awareness of the possibility of parent-teacher conflict and distrustful relationships was strongly apparent in the interview transcript. It should be noted, however, that the interviewee’s involvement with the IPPN’s principal advisory service makes it likely that he is particularly aware of principal and Parent Association/Board of Management conflicts (and from principals’ perspectives).

Despite the interviewee’s claim that parental involvement in schools is now a ‘good news story’ much of his account described poor relationships between parents and teachers. He discussed the rationale behind Supporting Each Other as a ‘joint document on the whole notion of parental relationships, around Parent Associations, how they could be construed in a way that would actually always make them work and what were the things that needed to be avoided’. The inclusion of ‘actually’ suggested that Parent’s Associations were frequently not ‘working’ prior to this. The devotion of a document to these concerns indicates their serious nature, as well as suggesting that common factors were obvious across different conflict scenarios. While the interviewee was enthusiastic about how successful and helpful Supporting Each Other has been, it was clear from his comments that difficult Parent Association/Principal relationships remain an important concern for the IPPN. The interviewee’s comment ‘Now when I deal with queries around dysfunctional Parents’ Associations…’, implied that he deals with such queries on a regular basis, while the use of the adjective ‘dysfunctional’ to describe Parents’ Associations twice in the interview seemed to place the blame for poor relationships more with the parents than the school. This sense of distrust between parents and teachers suggests managerial constructions are exerting an influence on parental involvement.

Difficulties with Boards of Management were also alluded to, with the interviewee stating that based on the feedback the IPPN get from principals, ‘good’ Boards are ‘more the exception than the rule’. He mentioned in particular how the system for electing members sounds very democratic, but can be difficult to achieve, especially in small parishes that have a number of schools and, therefore, high demand for ‘suitable people’. This point of criticism is limited in scope and would not necessarily mean that the whole Board of Management structure is considered ineffective. However, prior to it the interviewee commented that there is a need for care around ‘the notion of democracy in education’ and about the ‘fear of putting people in control who don’t actually have the wherewithal to use that control judiciously’. Arguably this indicated a low trust in the capacity and benefits of parental involvement in school management structures. The concern with parents gaining ‘control and authority’ in schools suggests that parental empowerment is perceived in managerial terms as something that will negatively impact on teachers.

When asked if he had any additional points that he wanted to make at the end of the interview, the interviewee discussed the need for a formal grievance procedure both for parents and teachers. Without doubting the need for formal grievance procedures, the possible relevance of the IPPN not having contributed to the existing procedures, and the daily work of the interviewee in which complaint procedures are likely to be important, it is, nonetheless, interesting that this was the sole
additional point chosen by the interviewee. This, and the accompanying description of conflict (‘as a principal if a parent comes barging into your school in the morning and “f’s” you out of it whether in front of the children or otherwise, there’s nothing you can do only grin and bear it’) reinforced the sense of a close connection being made between parental involvement in schools and relationships of conflict.

The interviewee expressed concern about the proposed Parents’ Charter (awaited at the time of the interview), for fear that it will be ‘seen as something with which to beat teachers’, claiming that the Minister for Education tends to talk about it in terms of ‘a mechanism by which parents can get rid of inefficient and underperforming teachers’. He commented that it would be a shame if such a charter was only viewed in such narrow terms, and as such was rejecting managerial discourses of the policing role of parents in education. Again, low trust of parents by teachers was a feature of the parent-teacher relationship alluded to here, as two uses of a ‘stick/beating’ metaphor indicated. If the interviewee’s concerns about the Charter are accurate, it suggests the emerging strength of managerial discourses of parent-teacher relations in Irish education. As an alternative to a supervisory style charter, the interviewee stated that the IPPN would favour the notion of a Parents’ Charter as a way of ‘highlighting the rights of parents, along mind you with their duties ….because you can’t have rights without duties’. While this recognises the mutual responsibility of parents and teachers, arguably also it could allow for a managerial approach whereby parents would be accountable to the school for fulfilling their duties correctly.

The interviewee explained: ‘My notion of empowering parents is actually helping and supporting them to help their own children’, and he continued that ‘the professional running of the school ….the teachers are quite capable of looking after that’. This limited definition of empowerment ‘in all the right ways’ is an interesting discursive strategy as it allows the IPPN to advocate for parental empowerment without necessarily affecting the status quo of parent-teacher power relations in schools generally. It infers wariness about the idea of parental empowerment which suggests that empowerment is understood in managerial terms as something that results in a corresponding disempowerment of teachers. Indeed, elsewhere in the interview, the interviewee discussed the introduction of Part 5 of the Teaching Council Act (fitness to teach) as ‘going to empower parents in a way that hasn’t been done heretofore’ because it will increase teacher answerability to parents regarding their effectiveness as teachers.

The sense of distrust between parents and teachers that permeated the interview indicates that the interviewee’s conceptualisation of parental involvement is influenced by managerial constructions, at least to an extent. He was not advocating managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations, however.
4.3.4.3 Interview with senior NPC-P official

A number of characteristics of managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations were inferred from *Education for Tomorrow*. Interestingly, however, managerial assumptions were not strongly apparent in the interview with the NPC-P official.

Rather than taking a school-centric view of education, the interviewee placed great emphasis on the importance of the home and of the role of the parent in ‘parenting children through education’. By paying attention to the ‘relationship piece’ of parental involvement the tone of the interview was very different from the list of imperatives contained in *Education for Tomorrow*. The professional role of the teacher was affirmed in the interview and teachers’ concerns regarding misconceptions of partnership were acknowledged. This contrasted greatly with the lack of attention paid to teacher perspectives in the document. Arguably then a more democratic set of discursive assumptions can be inferred from the interview transcript than from *Education for Tomorrow*.

The interviewee’s account of the rationale for and the development of *Supporting Each Other* tallied with that of the IPPN respondent. While some allusion was made to conflict between principals and Parents’ Associations, parent-teacher conflict was not a strong theme in the NPC-P interview, in contrast to the IPPN interview. The backdroping of conflict could be evidence of a democratic positioning of parents and teachers, and presenting a positive view of parental involvement is likely to suit the NPC-P’s purposes. Also it may be easier to argue for parental involvement from the parents’ perspective than from that of teachers and principals, given that if parental involvement is currently restricted at school level, then parents have little to lose in campaigning for greater involvement.

The interviewee’s point about the need to legislate for parental involvement may infer the influence of a managerialism, although this point was not based solely on managerial assumptions. She made a number of references to the NPC-P’s campaign to have the Minister for Education introduce legislation regarding parental involvement, noting how successful that campaign seems to have been (Parents’ Charter awaited at the time of the interview). She described how ‘some improved legislation often helps drive’ educational initiatives and she noted the important role of the DES with regard to change at school level. However, her acknowledgement of the need for genuine commitment to partnership from all participants contrasts strongly with the more strictly legislative approach identified in *Education for Tomorrow*. With reference to the length of Scotland’s *Parental Involvement Act* and the coercive nature of America’s system for ensuring parental involvement the interviewee stated ‘we wouldn’t want that because that’s driven by “you have to have it” rather than you believe it’s the right thing to do’. The limitations of a mandated approach were also evident in the interviewee’s discussion of why meaningful parental involvement in national level policy-making does not necessarily ‘always transcend down into a school’. Democratic as well as managerial influences are apparent in the approach taken to legislating for parental involvement, therefore.

In discussing the NPC-P/IPPN pilot scheme *Partnership Schools Ireland*, the interviewee described the involvement of local businesses such as banks in the initiative. This, along with the
emphasise on action plans and targets involved in the initiative, may infer some degree of a managerial approach, if the assumption is that schools will be improved by the implementation of business techniques. This has to be a tentative inference, however, given that the interviewee did not elaborate such involvement in managerial terms.

The difference in the approach to parent-teacher relations and parental involvement that was inferred from the interview in comparison with that inferred from Education for Tomorrow is striking. While this of course could be due to a weakness in the analysis of either or both, the interviewee was unequivocal in her discussion of partnership, and the fact that the critical reading of Education for Tomorrow undertaken after the interview resulted in broadly the same interpretations as the critical readings before the interview reduces the likelihood of analytic weaknesses causing a perception of disparity. Questions, therefore, are raised as to the degree to which the interviewee was presenting a personal opinion in the interview, although her use of pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘us’ suggested that she was speaking on behalf of the NPC-P, no tensions between her personal perspectives and those of the NPC-P were apparent during the interview and, indeed, such is her central role in the organisation that it seems unlikely that her opinions would differ much from organisational ones. It may be that the emphases of Education for Tomorrow, written by the representative Assembly of the NPC-P, differ somewhat from those of the officials of the NPC-P. This may be due to the NPC-P officials being most aware of the NPC-P’s successful involvement in national educational policy-making, and being able, therefore, to take a more optimistic view of parental involvement in education than the Assembly members whose experiences of parental involvement are more likely to be at school level. The different purposes of and audiences for Education for Tomorrow and the interview may also have resulted in different emphases. Since the policy document formed part of a process of gaining more meaningful involvement for parents in schools, presenting issues relating to parental involvement almost in a list format suited its purposes. The interviewee had scope to discuss the more subtle aspects of parental involvement, which allowed more emphasis on the relationship aspects that Education for Tomorrow ignores. The interviewer’s position as a primary school teacher may also have encouraged a more conciliatory approach to teachers.

4.3.4.4 Interview with senior ‘Educate Together’ official

Parental involvement was conceptualised in a democratic rather than managerial manner by the Educate Together respondent, in accordance with the movement’s charter. Nevertheless, the possibility that managerial constructions are exerting an influence on some aspects of parent-teacher relations in Ireland could be inferred from the interviewee’s comments.

Interestingly, and in contrast to the tone of Mission, Vision and Values, parent-teacher conflict was a strong theme in the interview. The interviewee was careful to attribute blame for this to both sides, remarking on the minority of ‘impossible’ parents and ‘impossible’ teachers with whom partnerships are unattainable. This point may be more related to the realities of interpersonal
interactions than to discursive assumptions and, indeed, it may be that an acknowledgement of these difficulties is actually a pre-condition for democratic constructions emerging. Nonetheless, the frequent reference to conflict drew attention to distrustful relationships between parents and teachers that seem characteristic of managerial constructions. The interviewee’s role in Educate Together headquarters is likely to make her particularly conscious of parent-teacher conflict, however.

Related to this the interviewee discussed the potentially negative implications of parent empowerment, noting how ‘teachers will tell you that they find themselves thwarted constantly by parents not being helpful, inciting their children to bad behaviour….’ and the vulnerability of teachers in the face of parental complaints. Again this may relate to a minority of ‘impossible’ people although the interviewee’s comments that teachers ‘get bashed so much that they are quite defensive’ implies that it was a more general observation. She outlined the need for teachers to be empowered in their interactions with parents and the role of principals in supporting teachers. While the recommended notion of dual empowerment is in accordance with democratic perspectives, the interviewee’s account of present day power relations suggested that dual empowerment is not widespread. Given the attention paid to partnership approaches by the Educate Together movement, that the negative connotations of parent empowerment was a theme of the interview seems significant.

The interviewee located Educate Together primarily as a school management body. In her discussion of power relations from a management perspective, she described the re-centralisation/de-centralisation tension inherent in managerialism, albeit this may be due to historical factors in Ireland as much as discursive assumptions; ‘management feel that power is in the hands of the Department and the unions …..we don’t have any say ….and yet we’re the employer…when the buck stops, it stops with us’. She described how the DES now have to ‘consult’ with the management bodies rather than ‘agree’ changes with them as previously, and how consultation can be defined in very different ways, implying that the management bodies do not feel listened to by the DES. Examples of poor connections between the DES and schools resulting in untenable policy decisions were provided. Her sense of frustration with this implies that top-down policy influences are becoming more important in Irish education.

The interviewee’s account of changes in the system for establishing new schools also inferred a tension between bottom-up and top-down decisions regarding parental involvement. She described how groups of parents used to come together to found schools with the support of Educate Together, and then lobby the DES to provide premises for them. Now the DES decides where new schools are needed and then invites patronage applications for them, of which Educate Together have gotten ‘a fair chunk’. While the latter system is arguably more efficient in terms of planning and resources, it serves to distance parents from school establishment decisions. Examples of schools being ‘plonked’ in the wrong side of a suburb suggest a disconnection between parent requirements and DES perspectives. The interviewee noted the implications this has for the Educate Together ethos, as it now has parents in its schools who did not choose an Educate Together school. Given the commitment
*Educate Together* has to school choice, the paradox that *Educate Together* might be providing the only accessible school for parents is notable. Admittedly it is difficult to see how this situation could be resolved within the parameters of the present school patronage model in Ireland. A re-centralisation of decision-making with regard to school provision that is in accordance with managerial approaches can, however, be identified from this account.

The *Educate Together* respondent did not promote a managerial vision of parent-teacher relations. Nonetheless, like the other interviewees, her account illustrates how aspects of managerial constructions are influential in Irish education.

**4.3.4.5 Interview with Education Consultant**

Some managerial assumptions with regard to the exercise of power in Irish education were inferred from the views expressed by the Education Consultant. However, the actual relationship between parents and teachers was not presented in a managerial form.

With regard to the establishment of the National Parents’ Council, the Education Consultant presented it as an executive decision ‘There wasn’t a huge long debate with the partners in education or anything, the minister just did it and it happened’. She was quite complimentary about this, noting that if the Minister ‘had stopped to have endless debates with the managers and the teacher unions and so on I don’t think it ever would have happened’. While this points to the efficiency of top-down decision-making, it diverges from democratic approaches. That the interviewee was involved with the NPC-P at the time and welcomed the Minister’s decision is likely to have influenced her opinion of the decision-making process. Admittedly she later expressed her frustration with regard to a number of policy objectives she as an educational lobbyist has been unable to persuade the DES about, indicating that she does support democratic processes of national policy-making. It can also be argued that the establishment of the NPC-P allowed for a greater democratic participation in Irish education, and so while the original decision was effected through an executive decision, it contributed ultimately to a more democratic construction of parental involvement.

Nonetheless, the understanding that there is a need for a strong DES in order to safeguard parents’ rights in schools was a theme of the Education Consultant’s comments. Indeed, she described the DES in the past as ‘far too weak’, noting particularly the ‘convoluted Board of Management/State relationship’. In common with the other interviewees she expressed doubts about the Board of Management system, noting that they have to do ‘an extraordinarily complex job with relatively little support’ and that there is still an imbalance in their relationship with the principal. Some sense of a ‘parents-as-police’ model could be detected in the interviewee’s dissatisfaction with the present situation whereby ‘The Department won’t entertain a complaint from a parent now’; albeit she did state that she did not believe parents should be ‘in the position of arbiter of the quality of teaching’. Arguably comments that the Department needs to ‘take up its proper place as the guardian of the children’s entitlement to a quality education’ and that ‘it is exerting itself to some extent but maybe
not in the ways that it needs to!’ infer distrust between parents and teachers, as well as expressing frustration that the DES does not take a stronger role in education. Notwithstanding the practical necessity of having a Department of Education with an oversight role, such a perspective on the centralisation of decision-making power seems to be in accordance with managerial discourses.

The Education Consultant admitted that the NPC-P might not be representative of all parents, noting how it has been labelled as a middle-class, rural or ‘Dublin 4’ organisation. She explained how the emergence of the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme affected the NPC-P’s ability to reach parents in disadvantaged areas. A lack of representativeness can be a feature of managerial constructions of parental involvement. However, since the NPC-P themselves, according to the interviewee’s account, were concerned with having ‘universal appeal’, the notion of a ‘threshold’ of membership cannot be taken as evidence of a managerial approach.

Managerial perspectives on parent-teacher relations themselves were not espoused by the interviewee. For instance, she rejected the ‘legalistic kind of school-based contract’ that is a feature of the English education system in favour of a ‘much different kind of relationship’ between parents and teachers. The discussion of how the NPC-P ‘made sure…the DES didn’t think about going down that [parent contract route] …’ implies that the managerial English system acts as a deterrent for Ireland in ways. Furthermore, the interviewee’s comment that the NPC-P in the early years ‘had an interest in parental involvement not for its own sake, but for the sake of the quality of education’, denies a managerially inspired parents’ rights agenda. She also commented on how the involvement of parents should be based on ‘solid research evidence’ rather than a parents’ rights agenda. This echoed comments made by the NPC-P representative about the present day motivation of the NPC-P.

Given that the Education Consultant was heavily involved in the NPC-P in the past, the managerial assumptions with regard to the exercise of power in Irish education are notable in light of the analysis of Education for Tomorrow, as managerial approaches were identified in that document. It seems plausible to contend that parents are more likely to advocate managerial constructions of parental involvement than are teachers, as parents are positioned more powerfully in managerial approaches. Notwithstanding this point, the interviewee did not construct the actual relationship between parents and teachers in managerial terms.

4.3.4.6 Interview with Senior Inspector

While the Senior Inspector did not discuss parental involvement in a managerial sense, some features of managerial discourse were inferred from the interview transcript, and that managerialism influences some school approaches to parents seemed acknowledged.

The interviewee’s reference to how the Inspectorate is ‘looking at….in our Business Plan….really trying to maximise the meaningfulness of the engagement that we have with them at school level’ involves strikingly managerial terminology, as well as implying that parent-inspector interactions are not optimal during inspections at school level at the present time. When asked about
the Inspectorate’s priorities, the first ‘big issue’ cited was ‘the way in which children’s learning is measured, monitored and then that information used to improve teaching and to target teaching resources at children who need them particularly’, albeit the interviewee clarified that she was not referring to standardised assessments in this. This interest in measurability and the oblique reference to financial efficiency arguably has the potential to conflict with notions of democratic parent-teacher relations.

The Inspector compared tension between Parents’ Associations and school management to the difficulties between the Garda Ombudsman and the Garda Commissioner (ongoing at the time of the interview), commenting that ‘it’s actually very healthy that a body is wary of its oversight body’. This raised the possibility that the interviewee was conceptualising the relationship between parents and schools in managerial terms as one of oversight and accountability. However, when asked directly if she thought parents were ‘oversight bodies’ for schools the Inspector replied ‘No I don’t think they are, I’m not sure that they ought to be’ which rejected such managerial inferences.

That a managerial approach to parental involvement may influence some school actions was apparent in the interviewee’s discussion of schools’ tendency to ‘tick the box that says we consulted’ by sending out finished versions of policies to parents, rather than meaningfully involving them in the policy-making process. She commented on the ‘tokenism’ that sometimes characterises parental involvement in schools, especially with regard to fundraising. The positioning of parents as consumers was implied in her comments on how parents sometimes regard the school as doing things for them; ‘I am paying you to do this’. Notably, the Inspector rejected this positioning, stating that her ‘vision would be…we’re supposed to be doing this together’.

Of all the interviewees, the Senior Inspector most clearly acknowledged the influence of European policy-making on Irish education. Describing this influence as ‘very strong’ she noted how Ireland has representatives on all the European education committees. She explained how the slow progress of policy-making at European level means that Ireland can sometimes be implementing policies arising from the European influence before those policy recommendations are actually officially sanctioned at European level. This is interesting, in that it draws attention to the difficulty inherent in assessing directions of influence and demonstrates how the European origins of certain policies may be hidden in official timelines.

Although the Inspector did not discuss parental involvement in managerial terms, the managerial inferences that were found in DES documentary sources were not contradicted by the interview, given the managerial influences that were identified during it.

4.3.4.7 Interview with senior NCCA official

The concern with parent education that was identified in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* was also evident in the NCCA interviewee’s contribution, albeit that a compensatory model approach was not as strongly apparent. A concern with standardising the
information received by parents may indicate some managerial assumptions, and her confirmation of the influential nature of Aistear across the education system is notable.

The interviewee’s explanation that ‘to demystify the curriculum for parents’ is part of the role of the NCCA provides a context for the interest in parent education identified in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners. Much of her discussion of the role of the NCCA regarding parental involvement revolved around the resources the NCCA produces, both to directly provide information to parents on curricular issues and to assist schools in informing parents about the progress of their children. These can be viewed as contributing to parental involvement in a democratic sense by building the capacity of parents to act as partners in the system, as well as encouraging schools to share meaningful information with parents.

However, it can also be argued that such resources serve to position parents as less knowledgeable than schools and policy-makers, subject to the educational objectives of the school and the State, in accordance with managerial constructions. The concern with standardising and formalising the way in which parents received information about education can be viewed from a managerial perspective as well. For instance, the interviewee mentioned the report card creator that the NCCA produced and that primary school teachers are obliged to use when providing end of year reports to parents. Notwithstanding its useful attributes, the template approach can be seen as a powerful disciplinary mechanism, as it dictates how and what teachers report to parents, and by extension dictates what is viewed as most and least important with regard to children’s progress in school. The ‘creator’ element of the software, by allowing schools to adjust the layout and appearance of the report cards they use, arguably conceals the influence the template itself exerts on the actual information that is provided. The interviewee discussed the report card creator in positive terms: ‘that initiative was fundamentally about ensuring that parents had a kind of a structured opportunity to hear about how well their children are doing in school’, but while it may have democratic consequences, the possibility of managerial effects also exists.

The interviewee discussed the influence Aistear is having on Irish curriculum and educational policy, with the Goodness Me, Goodness You project provided as an example of a programme that has been influenced by it. This is significant, in that the managerial assumptions regarding parent education that were identified in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners are relevant then across the education system, not just with regard to the early childhood care and education sector.

4.3.5 Concluding remarks regarding managerial constructions in the sources analysed

Arising from the documentary discourse analysis and the analysis of the interview transcripts, a number of points regarding managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations in Irish education are apparent. Although managerial assumptions were not overtly advocated in most of the discursive sources, nonetheless, there is evidence that managerial principles are exerting some influence on parental involvement in Irish education.
Teachers appear to be most wary of managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations. Teachers’ low trust of parents and parental involvement was a recurrent theme in the discourse analysed. Indeed, this wariness is such that it may prove a serious barrier even to democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations, in that teachers seem likely to retreat to traditional approaches to parents in the face of managerially inspired demands for greater parental involvement in schools. Despite teacher discomfort with managerial constructions, managerial terminology and influences could be detected even in teacher produced discourse. This demonstrates the pervasive nature of managerialism in education at the present time.

Although managerialism is influential across educational debate, it is inaccurate to claim that managerial discourses of parent-teacher relations are dominant in Ireland, at least yet. At school level managerial discourses are considerably weaker than traditional ones, whereas at national level managerial discourses appear secondary to democratic ones. There is not an easily accessible space in which managerialism can take root, therefore. An unwillingness to follow the English model was a theme in many of the interviews, and since the English education system is synonymous with managerial approaches, it may be that England is acting as a warning beacon against managerialism. That Ireland influences Europe with regard to parental involvement in schools rather than vice versa was mentioned by a number of the interviewees. This might mean that Irish education is less susceptible to the international emergence of managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations, if Irish education is perceived to be a leader in democratic constructions of parental involvement.

Importantly also, the high status that teaching has traditionally enjoyed in Ireland may offer some protection against the de-professionalising consequences of managerialism. Whether due to genuinely high standards or good fortune, Irish primary teaching has not (at the time of writing) been affected by the scandals involving other professions and bodies in recent years in Ireland. Consequently, there have not been the public demands for teacher accountability and reform that offer an opportunity for managerial discourses to become dominant. As long as parents remain satisfied with the quality of teaching in schools (cf. Hislop 2013) they are unlikely to want managerial forms of empowerment.

With the possible exception of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011), the notion that parental involvement is primarily a way to raise student attainment is notably absent from Irish discourse, despite being strongly apparent in international sources. This may relate to the longstanding holistic nature of the Irish primary curriculum, even if this was challenged in the aftermath of the 2009 PISA results, as Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life testifies. The absence of this assumption prevents another likely opportunity for managerial constructions to become dominant.

Notwithstanding the above, that managerial assumptions were detected in DES materials is significant, given the power the DES can potentially exercise in Irish education. The notion of a gulf between policy and practice in Irish education, and the capacity that schools and teachers have to resist
top-down discourses complicates this, however. Perhaps the emergence of managerialism is best conceptualised as a ‘creep’, in keeping with Sugrue’s (2006:192) description of ‘policy by stealth’. Certain discursive assumptions are less likely to meet resistance than others so the incorporation of these into policy allows managerial strands to inter-weave with strands from other discourses. For instance, the provision that school staffs have to report their compliance with various initiatives to the parent body of a school (cf. Circular 08/11; Circular 65/11; Circular 45/13) allows notions of ‘parents-as-police’ and teacher accountability to parents to be accepted into everyday practice, without stimulating the teacher resistance that would greet an explicit change to the role of parents in schools. Indeed, of itself this requirement is significant in illustrating the emerging strength of managerial discourses in Irish education. It is likely, therefore, that managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations are going to become increasingly relevant in the future.

4.4 Democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations in the discourse sources analysed

As discussed in Section 2.4, democratic constructions of parent-teacher relationships assume continuity between the home and the school, and position the home and school as having shared responsibility for the education of the child. Not only is parental involvement viewed as a way to increase academic attainments, but its other benefits for the life and education of the child are valued as, indeed, are benefits accruing to parents, teachers and wider society from having good relationships between parents and teachers. Democratic constructions operate from a perspective of dual empowerment, where both parents and teachers gain in their partnerships with each other, and where there is mutual respect and support for the other. Co-operation and sharing of knowledge with parents is part of a professional teacher’s role. The expert knowledge of the teacher and the individual knowledge of the parent are seen to be complementary to each other, with the possibility of mutual learning arising from parent-teacher interactions being understood. A process of joint decision-making is, therefore, assumed.

Partnership approaches to parent-teacher relations generally require a vision of the school as rooted in its local community, where it can benefit from the assets of the local community while also contributing to local life by playing a capacity building role for that community. The genuine commitment of all participants is a precondition of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations, given the importance of interpersonal relationships for partnerships. Supportive school cultures rather than legislation are, therefore, prioritised. Deliberative rather than adversarial forms of democracy would seem to be most suitable for ensuring genuine parent-teacher partnerships occur, as deliberative democracy is likely to result in a concern for minority issues and an interest in the common good. In order to be truly democratic the adequate representation of stakeholders must be achieved, and this is likely to involve widening traditional forms of parent participation to involve as
many parents as possible in processes of school decision-making. (cf. *inter alia* Groundwater Smith & Sachs 2002; Bauch & Goldring 2000; MacBeath 2012; Miretzky 2004; Cullingford & Morrison 1999).

4.4.1 Democratic justifications for parental involvement in schools/education in the documents analysed

4.4.1.1 Children’s education as the joint endeavour of the home and school

Any document that advocates parental involvement in education can be assumed to be operating from a perspective that regards the education of children as a matter of joint endeavour between the home and the school. It is unsurprising, therefore, that many of the documents analysed imply or state such a position, including *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* (NCCA 2009); *Supporting Each Other* (NPC-P & IPPN 2010); *Mission, Vision and Values* (Educate Together 2004); *Primary School Curriculum Introduction* (DES/NCCA 1999); *Parents as Partners in Education* (DES 1991); *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* (OECD Working Papers No 73. 2012) and *Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe* (EPA 2008).

The ideal of continuity between home and school recurs throughout *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners*, with the early care and education of children described as ‘shared among parents, families and practitioners’ (p7). The style of the document is predicated on promoting home-school links with, for instance, the location of each of the ‘Learning Experiences’ expressed in the form ‘home and …’ (relevant education/care setting) throughout. The core message that home and school must work together for the benefit of children is communicated directly through bullet-pointed tips for parents and practitioners, and indirectly through the models of close and successful co-operation provided in the ‘Learning Experiences’. Much attention is paid to the importance of the setting building on the child’s home interests and experiences, and of parents ensuring that the setting is aware of these (e.g. p14). The need for the childcare setting to reflect the diversity of the home is emphasised, and this point is reinforced by the multi-cultural nature of the ‘Learning Experiences’ examples. Some of the advice contains the implicit suggestion that the home would benefit from becoming more like the setting. Nonetheless, the document is based on the understanding that the education of young children is a joint endeavour between the home and the school, in accordance with democratic understandings of the parent-teacher relationship.

The mutual and reciprocal relationships implied in the title of *Supporting Each Other* suggest a partnership approach to parent-teacher relations, reinforced by the description of the core objective of the document as being to provide ‘a guide to best practice for the effective partnership between principals and Parent Associations’. This assumes both that partnership relations are necessary, and that it is possible to develop effective partnerships in schools. Such assumptions relate to an understanding of education as a shared responsibility between home and school, even though there is little reference in the document to parental involvement in education in the home, with education
conceptualised as something that takes place in school. The document outlines the Constitutional and legal protections of parental rights that exist in Ireland in making the argument for partnership with parents. Therefore, parental involvement in schools is justified as an integral part of school life, in keeping with democratic constructions.

Although education is conceptualised in school-centric terms in Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values, this is probably due to the movement being a school patronage body rather than just a parent representative group. With regard to that school-centric position, emphasis is placed on the right of parents ‘to choose the kind of education that is given to their children’. The call for parental choice of school may imply some element of a delegation model, given that the statement regarding the entitlement of parents to ‘participate actively in decisions that affect the education of their children’ is immediately followed by reference to their particular right ‘to decide what kind of school reflects their conscience and lawful preference’ (p1). The document makes no comment on the education that the child receives in the home, with the school seen as fulfilling parental preferences regarding education. The responsibility of the State to ensure that parents’ rights are respected in this regard is an underlying theme of the document. For instance, the quotation from Bunreacht na hÉireann to support the position of the Educate Together movement relates to the obligation of the State for provide free primary education with regard to the rights of parents, rather than the protection of parents as the primary educators of their children as might be expected in a document such as this. The document’s provision with regard to the active daily participation of parents in the school challenges this impression of school-centricness, however. Widening the framing context to include the movement’s overall thrust regarding parental involvement supports the notion that an understanding of education as the joint endeavour of the home and the school is in operation. Indeed, this assumption may be taken for granted to the extent that it was not thought necessary to discuss it in detail in the document.

The section addressing the role of parents in Primary School Curriculum Introduction is based on the understanding that parents are the primary educators of their children, that education is a joint endeavour between the home and the school and that children benefit from parental involvement in their education and schools. This is characteristic of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations. Notwithstanding this, however, the limited references to parents outside of the four paragraphs that comprise this section are notable. The sense that the democratic approach to parents does not underpin the whole document weakens the argument for it considerably.

Parent-teacher partnership is justified on the grounds of a joint endeavour model in Parents as Partners in Education. Interestingly, partnership is presented as something particularly relevant to primary level education, thereby disregarding its importance at other levels of the system, albeit the Circular was addressed only to national schools.

The understanding that parents and teachers share responsibility for the education of the child is present as a justification for parental involvement in education in Parental Involvement in Selected
**PISA Countries and Economies.** Parental involvement is defined in terms of partnerships between teachers, parents and community, and the influence of Epstein is evident. The collocation of increased parental involvement in their children’s education and the need for parents ‘to be more present in their children’s lives’ (p13) connects parental involvement and parent-child relationships in a way not often found in the literature and policy reviewed. The emphasis on ‘direct’ parental involvement (e.g. p14) has the same effect, with the activising of parents and parenting a concern of the text. All parents are envisaged as being potential assets for their children, and the document is clear that high levels of specialised education are not necessary for supporting children’s learning. By describing parents as ‘role models’ (p32) and ‘resources’ (p16) for their children parental involvement is conceptualised as a form of social capital. This understanding of continuity between the learning environments of both the home and the school provides a democratic justification for parental involvement.

A cross-community approach to child rearing and education is evident in the *Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe*. It is asserted that schools or families cannot separate themselves from the community even if they so wish, as children grow up ‘right in the middle of the real world’. Schools are presented as supporting the work of parents, rather than vice versa; ‘Parents need not stand alone….’ This does not imply that the role of schools is unimportant, however, as the document clarifies. The joint endeavour model, the emphasis on the importance of community links and the need for continuity between home and school that can be understood from the document are characteristic of democratic justifications of parental involvement.

The joint endeavour model is a recurring theme in the documents analysed from both Irish and international sources. Indeed, such is the taken-for-granted nature of joint endeavour between the home and the school in Irish discourses of parental involvement that the omission of a joint endeavour model from a document seems insufficient evidence to assume the rejection of that model. Rather it might have been deemed unnecessary to state it directly.

**4.4.1.2 Holistic benefits accruing to children**

A justification of parental involvement in schools on holistic as well as academic ground can be identified in: *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* (NCCA 2009); *Supporting Each Other* (NPC-P & IPPN 2010); *Mission, Vision and Values* (Educate Together 2004); *Council Conclusions of 20 December 1996 on School Effectiveness: Principles and Strategies to Promote Success at School* (Council of the European Union 1996) and *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* (OECD Working Papers No 73. 2012) albeit that academic justifications are prominent in the last document.

The primary justification for parent-practitioner partnership in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* revolves around the benefits partnership brings to young children’s lives, such as supporting the child’s sense of belonging, identity and comfort levels in the setting (p8). The child centred nature of parent-practitioner partnership is reinforced by the colourful style of the
document, and the inclusion of children’s drawings and photographs. This communicates a sense of fun and excitement about the child’s experiences in early childhood education and care settings. In keeping with this tone, there are few references made to the academic attainment of individual children, with general terms such as ‘do well in school’ (p11) and ‘pleased with progress’ (p 25) used instead of specific references to targets or standards. The Aistear curriculum framework ‘Learning Goals’ are the only mention of targets included, and these are referred to by number, rather than being expounded fully. The attention being paid to parental involvement in early childhood settings may be part of an effort to ensure that parents develop good habits of involvement that will enhance the child’s attainment later in their educational career, but within the early childhood context the emphasis is on the benefits accruing to the child in a holistic sense. A list of seventeen ‘benefits of parents and practitioners working together’ (p8) for parents, practitioners and children is included. The reader is likely to infer that these benefits are based on educational research given their presentation in the form of a non-negotiable factual list, although the source is not explicitly stated. The three part nature of this list and the descriptions in the ‘Learning Experiences’ of how relationships of partnership were successful in overcoming parents’ worries in the settings ensure that the benefits accruing to parents and practitioners from having good relationships with each other are also recognised. The ‘Learning Experiences’ serve to legitimate discourses of democratic parent-teacher relations through ‘mythopoesis’ (Hyatt 2013:8), that is through providing short stories that demonstrate the positive consequences for children of parents and practitioners acting in partnership.

The benefits of parental involvement in schools are conceptualised in broad terms in Supporting Each Other. Parents and teachers are described as wanting ‘the best for children’ (p4), with children understood as learning more, behaving better and being happier at school when there is effective partnership between home and school. Parents’ Associations are described as a source of support for parents. A variety of activities that Parent Associations might engage in are listed in the text and care is taken to note that Parent Associations will differ depending on school context, thereby indicating an interest in catering to the specific needs of the individual school and its pupils (p13). Thus, the role of parents and Parents’ Associations in schools is justified in democratic terms.

The holistic development of children is a specific concern of Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values. Throughout the document reference is made to the inclusive, respectful and supportive education provided in Educate Together schools, in which children are encouraged ‘to explore their full range of abilities and opportunities’ (p1), and are provided with ‘the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes that they need, enabling them to make informed moral decisions and preparing them to become caring members of society’ (p2). While no direct connection is made between these features and good parent-teacher relations, the entitlement of parents to choose such an education for their children is emphasised. Parental involvement is construed as a way of ensuring that the cultural, social and moral aspects of education are properly catered for in schools and, therefore, as
something that benefits children in a holistic sense. This indicates that democratic assumptions are influential.

Principles and Strategies to Promote Success at School mentions how ‘a supportive home and community environment, especially for children needing support and those from foreign backgrounds is an important factor in promoting success in school, achieving high retention rates and improving participation at higher level’. While ‘school success’ could be envisaged in narrow managerial terms, the document starts by outlining how young people need to be ‘assisted to achieve their full potential as individuals’ and lists political, economic, social and democratic development in this regard. This involves a relatively holistic view of education. Benefits of parental involvement in schools that accrue to parents are also listed although, interestingly, this is in the context of involvement in pre-schools. These include developing parents’ self-esteem, meeting their personal development needs and empowering them to participate in school life. Parental involvement is, therefore, justified in the document in democratic terms regarding the benefits it brings to parents and children.

As noted in Section 4.3.1.4, Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies justifies parental involvement in terms of its contribution to economic growth. However, the inclusion of ‘equity’ along with ‘efficiency’ in its objectives arguably indicates a more holistic vision of education, and it is notable that parental involvement is described as a useful ‘policy lever to reduce gaps in performance and non-cognitive outcomes related to socio-economic background’ (p47). Democratic justifications in terms of the holistic benefits of parental involvement in schools seem to co-exist with managerial ones, therefore.

The understanding that parental involvement brings holistic benefits to children is a common theme in the documents analysed. While this rationale appears to be in direct contrast to the understanding that parental involvement is a lever to raise pupil attainment in narrow sense, it is possible for both discourse strands to co-exist within the one document. This is particularly relevant when the consequences of academic attainment are seen to bring holistic benefits to the child (cf. Desforges 2014).

4.4.1.3 Contribution to democratic teacher professionalism

Although most of the documents analysed do not elaborate on the consequences of parental involvement for teacher professionalism, it is a strong theme in Parental Involvement, Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997), as has been noted in Section 4.2.1.2. While ostensibly this document argues that the enhancement of teacher professionalism forms part of the rationale for parent-teacher partnerships, a critical reading of it suggested that conflicting approaches to the potential partnership/professionalism relationship are in operation.

Macbeth’s (1989) argument that ‘educational partnership with parents is at the very heart of teachers’ professionalism’, and ‘that a structured educational partnership is to some degree central to the concept of the teacher as a professional’ (p12) is the first conceptualisation of teacher
professionalism discussed in Possibilities for Partnership. The citing of Macbeth’s rejection of the view that parental involvement is ‘an optional extra’ or ‘a favour bestowed on parents’ (p12) rejects a key aspect of the traditional construction of parent-teacher relations. The negative consequences of ‘a failure to recognise parents as co-educators and to utilise them fully…’ (p18) are considered and teachers are advised to ‘take the initiative in organising collaboration with parents’ (p19). By addressing teacher concerns relating to the impact of parental involvement on their professionalism, the chapter provides a necessary grounding for an open discussion of parent-teacher relations, and reassures teachers that they should not, indeed, cannot afford to be, fearful or reluctance to embrace parent-teacher partnership. The document contains much, therefore, that is indicative of a democratic approach to parent-teacher relations.

However, an examination of the information structures and topic flow in the chapter revealed that the argument in favour of parent-teacher partnerships was not all that coherently made, with, for instance, a tendency to introduce tangential points during the discussion making it difficult for the reader to get an overall sense of what this approach to parent-teacher relations might involve. This sense of other issues being interwoven into the discussion results in a somewhat disjointed paragraph order. It is sometimes indistinct about what aspects of the preceding content is agreed or disputed. In some chapters of the document a digression from parental involvement related issues is particularly marked. Since arguing a point coherently is a basic principle of persuading the reader of the validity of an argument, the lack of coherence here suggests that the author/s are unconvinced regarding their own argument, although admittedly this may not have occurred deliberately. Nonetheless, it serves to weaken the pro-partnership arguments that are present in the text. Furthermore, even if the poor cohesion of the argument for democratic constructions was inadvertent, partnerships are also more overtly cautioned against, as was noted in Section 4.2. While Possibilities for Partnership justifies increasing parental involvement in schools on the ground that this will enhance teacher professionalism, the actual level of commitment to this justification is debatable, therefore.

4.4.1.4 To align the school more closely with its local community

The notion that schools should be closely connected to their local communities, both as capacity builders and to access the assets of those communities for their pupils is a recurrent rationale for greater parental involvement in the documents analysed. It is particularly apparent in many of the Irish documents, including Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009); Mission, Vision and Values (Educate Together 2004); Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010); Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011) and Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010). Involve Parents, Improve School (EACEA 2009); Council Conclusions of 20 December 1996 on School Effectiveness: Principles and Strategies to Promote Success at School (Council of the European Union 1996) and Commission Staff Working Paper, Schools for the 21st Century
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

(Commission of the European Communities 2007) also contain community oriented models, albeit that they are conceptualised in a more complex form in the latter document.

Throughout Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners, early childhood education and care settings are located in the context of their local community, with the settings presented as being at the centre of a community of parents, and as being connected to local community organisations and events. While the age of the children concerned and the very practical nature of the skills they learn in early childhood settings influence this sense of connectedness, the document also deliberately fosters it; for instance, through the example of the ‘Happy Start Nursery’ newsletter (p17). Along with its content, the chatty, friendly tone, and the use of the ‘we’ and ‘our’ pronouns throughout the newsletter create the sense of a happy and inclusive community. An ‘assets of the community’ approach is in operation here, as demonstrated, for instance, by the reference to ‘Mr Mackey’ coming to talk to the children about honey-making. Since parents are invited to such talks, and the importance of parents helping each other is emphasised both in the tips for parents (p14), and ‘thinking about my practice’ (p15) subsections of the ‘Sharing Information’ section, an element of the setting acting as a capacity builder for parents is also in evidence. Thus, democratic constructions are influential.

Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values contains an explicit commitment to ‘Building school communities which engage with, and work meaningfully with the local community’ (p2). The notion of the school community is expanded by the inclusion of ‘supporters’ (p2) among the list of people with whom Educate Together schools work. Arising from this, the Educate Together movement is presented as an organisation that is emerging from parental demands for multi-denominational education, and as one that is in close contact with its constituency. The emphasis on the input of the local community implies an ‘assets of the community’ approach, in that Educate Together schools both belong to local communities and are the fruit of the work of the local community. Active and daily parental involvement is seen to benefit the school and the education it provides. In conjunction with this, the Educate Together movement is positioned as a capacity builder for parents and local community members, given the commitment in this document that Educate Together will support parents who wish to establish a multi-denominational school in their local area. An interest in capacity building can also be identified in the commitment to promote fuller awareness of the multi-denominational sector in Ireland and abroad, and to participate in structures and activities concerned with the future development of education. This stance on the role of the school in the community is in accordance with democratic perspectives.

Supporting Each Other positions Parents’ Associations as a link between the school and its local community. The document recognises the valuable contribution Parents’ Associations make to schools, in accordance with an ‘assets of the community’ model. Its recommendations regarding Parent Association activities such as welcoming new parents, organising social gatherings, fund-raising and informing parents (p13) gives a capacity building role to Parents’ Associations also. This infers a democratic positioning of the school and the community.
Specific reference to ‘parents and communities’ in the title of the chapter on parental involvement in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* indicates that school and education are considered in a community context, in keeping with democratic assumptions. An interest in involving community groups in literacy and numeracy development is expressed, and the contribution of local community groups, libraries, parents and extended families to the education of children is recognised, albeit dissatisfaction with the lack of co-ordination of these groups is implied.

In *Education for Tomorrow*, schools are described as ‘cornerstones’ of communities and it is asserted that schools and communities should benefit each other (p6). The inclusion of a discrete section on parent volunteering is in accordance with a view of parents as assets for schools. The notion of parents as assets is reinforced by the understanding that the benefits of parental involvement apply ‘irrespective of social background, size of family or even the level of parental education’. The detailing of areas for parent education, and the duty of schools to help parents to help their children at home suggests that the school is understood to have a capacity building role in the community as well. Democratic assumptions are, therefore, relevant.

In terms of placing the school at the centre of its local community *Involve Parents, Improve School* displays strongly democratic constructions, as it makes a close association between parental and community involvement; ‘parental involvement means community involvement’ (*IP-IS Final Report* p3). To this end it was part of the ‘project philosophy from the very start to find partners in the local community who would positively and actively support the inclusion of parents’ (*IP-IS Final Report* p3). The inclusion of a networking grid (*IP-IS Final Report* p9), which locates schools/teachers in the middle of a wide community-based network that encompasses different aspects of people’s lives, provides a visual explanation of the commitment to this community orientated approach. The toolboxes provide advice for teachers who act as co-ordinators for such networks, or who are interested in establishing them around their schools. Schools are positioned then both as recipients of the benefits of community and parental involvement (as indicated by the title of the project), and as capacity builders for the local community.

That home-school-community links are perceived as important in *Principles and Strategies to Promote Success at School* is evident from the devotion of a subsection to the topic in the document, and the description of links between home and school as ‘a key element in any strategy to promote success at school’ (p4). Among the proposals for achieving success in school is ‘a community-based response where appropriate, where school, community and other relevant agencies are mutually responsive to all children and especially those from families needing support and where their work is complementary’ (p2). Notably, since ‘community’ is not defined, it may be formal agencies and community groups that are deemed to be assets for schools and children, rather than the local community in a more general sense, but in any event this does not contradict a probable democratic approach to parental involvement.
The use of the terminology of ‘school communities’ in *Schools for the 21st Century*, its reference to the need for the school to work in partnership with other agencies and organisations, and its call for ‘effective links between schools and the wider world’ (p9), suggests a democratic justification for involving parents and others in the school. The difficulties of such an approach are not ignored, however, as evidenced by the listing of negative elements that can be found in school communities (p9). While this wariness about engaging with the local community might imply traditional approaches to school-community links, it is emphasised that schools should teach alternative values rather than detaching themselves from their communities. Schools are understood to have among their purposes the creation of a particular type of society, the ultimate aim of which may relate to economic imperatives (a managerial concern), but also aim to develop individual well-being, inclusion, equality and a rejection of anti-social behaviours and values, the latter which are crucial for the development of genuine democracy. The maintenance of school ethos and values in the face of different local community values, and the complexities involved in resolving fundamental differences of opinion between elements in the community complicates parent-teacher relations. By acknowledging such complexity, the document allows for a nuanced discussion of the challenges inherent in schools engaging with the wider world, and as such may advance rather than inhibit the position of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations.

The frequency with which the theme of school-community links recurred across the documents analysed is striking and, notably, *Schools for the 21st Century* was the only document that problematised it. This raises the possibility that many of the more difficult aspects of parental involvement are avoided when it is community involvement that is discussed and, therefore, that it is easier to promote democratic discourses with regard to community involvement.

4.4.1.5 Political justifications for parental involvement in schools

While all of the above justifications for parental involvement are likely to have wider political implications in society, and the political consequences of education can never be denied, the *Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe* (EPA 2008) and to a lesser extent *Commission Staff Working Paper, Schools for the 21st Century* (Commission of the European Communities 2007) address political motivations for involving parents in schools. Political motivations are also inferred in *Parents as Partners in Education* (DES 1991).

The purposes of the education for which parents and schools must work together are conceptualised in the *Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe* with emphasis on ‘new co-operation’, ‘unity’ and ‘a common identity’, and focused on the creation of ‘a democratic Europe, which will continue to regard its diversity as a source of inspiration’. Parental involvement in their children’s education is presented as a way to further the European project, therefore, and so has deeply political consequences. At an overt level such justifications are in accordance with democratic
justifications, although the strong managerial discourses present in many instances in the European project cannot be ignored.

The need for democracy in schools is stressed in *Schools for the 21st Century* as a way of educating pupils that ‘democracy is not a game of adults for adults’ (p9), and this is likely to impact on parental involvement in school decision-making. A ‘sound school education’ is described as laying ‘the foundations for an open and democratic society by training people in citizenship, solidarity and participatory democracy’ (p4). Discourses of active citizenship can be seen to underlie the document, therefore. Again this is in accordance with democratic principles, albeit that the use of the term ‘training’ raises the possibility of managerial undertones.

The provisions of *Parents as Partners in Education* are set in the political context of the ‘Programme for Economic and Social Progress’, with reference made to how the Social Partners have recognised parent-teacher partnership as an essential educational strategy. That it was deemed necessary to include this statement can be interpreted from a number of discourse perspectives. Its inclusion may relate to the novelty of parent-teacher partnerships at that stage in Irish education, and so form part of the DES’s efforts to ‘sell’ partnership in a traditionally inspired educational climate. Focussing on the economic objectives of social partnership suggests a managerial undertone to the document. Alternatively, however, describing how the prioritisation of parental involvement in educational policy emerged through social partnership may demonstrate the influence of democratic discourses of partnership at all levels of the education system. Partnership with parents is presented as part of a wider political process to increase the democratic representation of citizens in government decision-making. Such a presentation is a useful discursive strategy in gaining public approval for policy developments.

**4.4.2 Democratic presentations of parent-teacher power relations in the documents analysed**

**4.4.2.1 Positive and trusting partnerships between parents and teachers**

Parent-teacher relationships are envisaged as highly trusting and mutually responsive in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* (NCCA 2009); *Supporting Each Other* (NPC-P & IPPN 2010) and *Mission, Vision and Values* (*Educate Together* 2004). Trust in parent-teacher interactions is also mentioned in *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* (OECD Working Papers No 73. 2012).

The construction of positive relationships between parents and practitioners in early childhood care and education settings is one of the main objectives of *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners*, as its title makes clear. The definition of partnership on which it is based involves the recognition, respecting and valuing of the other, as well as involving responsibility on both sides (p7). This presumes more equal relationships between parents and practitioners than found in either the traditional or managerial model of parental involvement. By asking of partnerships ‘Why are they
important?’ it is assumed that the reader will agree that partnerships are important, thereby normalising the notion that partnerships are the most appropriate form of relationship between practitioners and parents of young children. The Aistear curriculum framework applies to all early childcare settings as well as primary schools; hence, the references to parent-practitioner rather than parent-teacher relationships throughout. This distinction is important in allowing the argument for partnership to be so definitively made, as parent-practitioner relationships do not have to contend with the traditional constructions of parent-teacher relationships that often make genuine parent-teacher partnership difficult to achieve.

The portrayal of highly trusting relationships between parents and practitioners in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners supports its objective of developing partnerships. Trust is acknowledged as a precondition for partnership (p7). While parents are encouraged to ask questions of practitioners, these relate to obtaining advice or information on the child, rather than any sense that they should be monitoring the practitioner’s work. The location and use of bold print for the word ‘ask’ in the sentence ‘If there is something that you are not clear about or that you are concerned about, ask’, suggests that ‘asking’ will be sufficient to resolve the parent’s concern, and so is located in the context of parental worries rather than raising any possibility that there might be problems in the setting. The striking absence of an accountability agenda, even in relation to what is in places an ad hoc and privately funded system, (albeit the Child Care Regulations 2006 and the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme have systematised it somewhat), depicts all parents and practitioners as working in the best interests of the child, and so allows their relationship with each other to be envisaged as collaborative rather than combative.

In keeping with this theme of high trust, parents are portrayed as insiders in the early childhood care and education settings throughout Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners. The importance of parents both being physically present in the settings and being in close contact with practitioners recurs throughout the document. All of the ‘Learning Experiences’ model parents acting and being treated as insiders in the settings, and there is no sense of disapproval or caution in relation to exceeding professional boundaries. Parents are advised, for instance, to ‘get to know’ practitioners, to ‘look at displays’ in the setting, and to ‘offer to help’ (p14), while practitioners are advised to ‘invite parents to spend time in the setting’ (p10), to ‘talk informally’ to parents, (p14) and to ‘organise a variety of activities’. In particular there appears to be a deliberate attempt to position parents who might be likely to be ‘outsiders’ in the traditional model, as ‘insiders’ here. The design of the document, which is addressed to both parents and practitioners, and where the advice sections for practitioners are matched by ones for parents, also contributes to the sense of an ‘insider’ positioning. As well as an ‘insider’ positioning of parents, there is also an ‘insider’ positioning of childcare practitioners, as the term ‘practitioner’ is used across settings and regardless of qualifications or employment status. This approach is in accordance with democratic understandings of parent-
teacher power relations, even if it is challenged somewhat by the strong parent education model that was discussed in Section 4.3.2.3.

*Supporting Each Other* uses the language of partnership to discuss its vision of relationships between principals and parents, with ‘an ethos of transparency and openness between all members of the school community’ (p3) supported. Although no definition of partnership is provided, relationships of mutual responsibility are implied by the listing of rights and responsibilities for both parents and teachers/principals (pp. 8-9), with the rights of one presented in the context of the responsibilities of the other. As well as directing the behaviour of the reader, these bullet-pointed lists imply a dual empowerment ideal, in that both parties have scope to exercise power in the relationship. The joint authorship of *Supporting Each Other* itself implies a mutual and power sharing approach, with equal priority given to both logos on the front cover. The photographs in the document suggest positive relationships between equals, in that it is not possible to distinguish between parents and principals in them, since all are professionally dressed with no-one in possession of the obvious props of principalship or parenthood. Democratic constructions are, therefore, implied. Notably, however, the document focusses on principals and Parent Associations, and so its assumptions may not apply to parents and teachers more generally. Also, the potential for difficult relationships between principals and Parents’ Associations if the recommendations of the document are not implemented is assumed, as noted in Section 4.3.1.3.

*Mission, Vision and Values* pledges that the *Educate Together* movement is committed to ‘working in a democratic way that embraces the input from children, parents, teachers and supporters to enable the highest level of partnership and participation’ (p2). The description of *Educate Together* schools as being ‘democratically run with active participation by parents in the daily life of the school’ positions parents as insiders in the school. There is no sense of a boundary that parents should not cross, albeit that the latter quote concludes with ‘whilst positively affirming the professional role of teachers’ (p1). This acknowledges that parental involvement can be seen as detrimental to teachers’ professionalism, and indicates an awareness of the traditional hesitancy of parents to engage with parent-teacher partnership. The positive affirmation of teachers may also relate to an interest in avoiding the narrow, low trust accountability that is a feature of managerial approaches, in that better relations between parents and teachers are envisaged for *Educate Together* schools. Although any further discussion of teacher professionalism would not have been within the remit of the charter, and it is not discussed beyond this, it can be argued that the vision of schooling portrayed here implies that engagement with parents is part of a professional teacher’s role. If parents are to have a role in the daily running of the school and in decision-making, and this as stated does not interfere with teacher professionalism, then it appears likely a democratic understanding of parent-teacher power relations is in operation.

The language of partnership between parents and schools is used in *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies*, with, for instance, schools advised to ‘create an environment
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

of co-operation and partnerships’, and reference made to ‘fluid communication’ and ‘a relationship based on trust’ (p45). It seems more accurate, however, to describe the parent-teacher relationships envisaged in this document as involving a partnership in terms of the similar values, approaches and attitudes that parents and teachers should adopt in relation to the individual child’s literacy development, rather than in describing a particular type of relationship between parents and teachers. Nonetheless, this does not contradict a democratic construction of parent-teacher power relations.

The references to partnership and trust in these documents are optimistic regarding the nature of the parent-teacher relationship. The normalising intentions, particularly of Building Partnerships between Practitioners and Parents and Supporting Each Other, are notable in terms of the promotion of democratic discourses.

4.4.2.2 Complementary knowledge of parents, possibility of mutual learning

Recognising the value of parental involvement in education acknowledges that parents have knowledge and experience complementary to that of teachers. Of the documents analysed it is in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009) that this assumption is made most explicit. The notion of parents and teachers having complementary knowledge can also be inferred from Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010); Mission, Vision and Values (Educate Together 2004); Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe (EPA 2008) and European Report on the Quality of School Education: Sixteen Quality Indicators (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture May 2000). The contribution of parents to education at national level is acknowledged in Parents as Partners in Education (DES 1991).

Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners is aimed at both parents and practitioners and seems in its style and content to be conscious of the disparity in the qualifications and experience of practitioners working in early childcare settings in Ireland. It is directed at the level of the individual reader, whether parent or practitioner, and encourages self-evaluation through the provision of questions about practice for both parents and practitioners. These questions are written in the first person which as well as encouraging personal reflection, contributes to an informal, supportive tone and makes the reader feel empowered regarding their own practice. Parents are presented as being active in presenting their concerns and opinions, and in receiving information about their child (p14) so the possibility of negotiation and discussion about the child’s best interests exists. The advice about activities parents might undertake with their children and the recommendation that parents look at the Aistear curriculum framework for ideas on supporting their children’s learning (p9) suggests that parents are not excluded from accessing pedagogical information, at least in relation to young children. Despite then the parent education model discussed in Section 4.3.2.3, the document acknowledges the complementary knowledge of parents and practitioners and to that extent is in accordance with democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations.
Although *Education for Tomorrow* has many characteristics of managerial parent-teacher power relations, some democratic values are also present in terms of empowerment and knowledge. For example, the recommendation that parents participate in ‘setting their children’s learning goals each year’ (p20) implies a degree of complementary knowledge between parent and teacher. Similarly, the recommendation that school reports should give an opportunity to the child, the parent and the teacher ‘to have a viewpoint’ (p18), recognises that all participants have valuable information to impart. However, these democratic understandings were not elaborated upon in any detail and so do not appear to form the dominant discourse in the document.

The difficult beginnings experienced by the *Educate Together* movement in gaining legitimacy for itself as an education provider can be inferred from the opening section of *Mission, Vision and Values*. This serves to position parents as capable and knowledgeable, given that the *Educate Together* movement was successful in establishing schools, despite the shortcomings in State support. The listing of the social, cultural and moral benefits accruing to children who receive an *Educate Together* education further highlights parental knowledge and capacity, given parental involvement in the maintenance as well as the establishment of such schools. The emphasis in the charter on the necessity of parents being able to choose the type of school they want for their children and, indeed, on the existence of the *Educate Together* movement itself, indicates the importance attached to the role of the school, and by extension its teachers, in society. Therefore, it can be regarded as an indirect acknowledgment of the skills, knowledge and expertise of the teacher. A concept of complementary knowledge between parents and teachers, in keeping with democratic approaches, can perhaps be assumed, although the document does not discuss this directly.

By stating that parents have the right to ensure that the education of their children occurs in accordance with ‘their pedagogical convictions’, the *Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe* implies that pedagogy is not something that only teachers are entitled to have opinions on. Indirectly this recognises parental knowledge. Throughout the document schools and teachers are cast in the role of supporting parents, rather than the more usual opposite position. Arguably this inverse positioning avoids the traditionally contentious aspects of parent-teacher power relations, in that teacher power is conceived quite differently if they are seen as supporters of parents as the prime educators of children rather than vice versa. In moving away from traditional or managerial constructions of parent-teacher power relations this positioning at least offers the potential to construct parent-teacher power relations in democratic ways.

The contention in *Sixteen Quality Indicators* that school planning should not be confined to school leaders or teachers (p45) indicates an interest in rebalancing power in the parent-teacher relationship in favour of parents. If school development planning benefits from the ‘particular insights and added value’ (p45) of parental participation, this suggests that teacher expertise is not adequate by itself to allow for the best forms of school planning. By extension then allowing a role for parents in school planning assumes they have knowledge that is complementary to that of teachers. The
comment on how ‘European unions of parents, teachers, school students and head-teachers have already, through joint conferences, laid the groundwork for fuller and richer collaboration’ (p45), also raises the likelihood of mutual learning, as well as seeking to normalise the practice, and so seems in accordance with a dual empowerment model of parent-teacher relations. The reference from which this implication was drawn was of a limited nature, however.

*Parents as Partners in Education* quotes the work of the NPC-P, and directly notes their ‘distinctive and valuable contribution to central planning and policy development’. This recognises the complementary knowledge of parents, at least at national levels. The emphasis on the establishment of Parents’ Associations and their contribution to schools can also be read as appreciating parents’ complementary knowledge. Interestingly, however, little attention is paid to the possibility of parents giving useful information parents to schools, rather school information is prioritised in the section ‘School/Family Relationships’. The complementary knowledge of parents at individual level is not as strong a theme as that of parents at national levels, therefore.

The recognition of the complementary knowledge of parents was more apparent in parent originated documents than teachers ones. Notwithstanding the difficulty of making inferences based on omissions, this may point to teachers’ continuing difficulty with the notion of parent knowledge being compared to teacher knowledge.

**4.4.2.3 Parents’ rights agenda**

As noted in *Section 4.3.2.5*, the parents’ rights agenda, particularly evident in *Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe* (EPA 2008) presents a conundrum in terms of distinguishing between managerial and democratic constructions of parent-teacher power relations, in that it can be viewed from both perspectives. This is true also of *Parents as Partners in Education* (DES 1991). The parents’ rights agenda evident in *Mission, Vision and Values* (*Educate Together* 2004) seems in accordance with democratic perspectives of parent-teacher power relations.

In terms of democratic constructions, the *Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe* unequivocally understands parents to be the primary educators of their children, and places great emphasis on the importance of good parenting for the future of Europe. Since the education of children is an integral part of their role, parental involvement in schools does not need to be justified in separate terms but rather is seen as part of parents’ core rights and responsibilities. The charter explains that parents have the right to ‘exert influence on the policy which their children’s school implements’, ‘the right to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions’, and the right to form new schools in order to allow them to choose a school ‘which is closest to their convictions and to the values they hold dear in raising their children’. Accompanying these rights, parental responsibility is emphasised; ‘Parents have the duty to commit themselves as partners in education to the school of their children’ and, indeed, parental responsibility for their own children is described as ‘an irreplaceable cornerstone of
society’. This construes parents as being active citizens with regard to parent-teacher relations, as well as locating parent-teacher partnerships in the realm of genuine parent commitment, rather than being something that is ‘done to’ parents by schools. That these parent rights are grounded in the duty of the parent to care for their own child, rather than an interest in controlling teachers or schools also suggests democratic influences, even if the individualising effect of basing relationships on the needs of the parents’ own children may be symptomatic of managerial approaches. An active and genuinely committed view of parental involvement is in accordance with democratic justifications of parental involvement in schools, but the possibility that the parents’ rights agenda contains the parent empowerment strand of managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations within it, cannot be discounted.

Parents’ rights to information about their children and the school are presented in the context of their Irish Constitutional position as primary educators in *Parents as Partners in Education*. As noted in Section 4.3.1.3 the accountability implications of such rights could suggest a managerial perspective. Alternatively, however, the point that parents have a right to be partners in schools can be read as inferring a democratic approach to parent-teacher relations.

Unsurprisingly given its charter format, *Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values* is concerned with naming parents’ rights. Parent power is assumed in the detailing of the rights of parents to choose schools, to want particular types of education for their children, to be involved in making decisions about their child’s education and to have daily participation in the school (pp.1, 2). The legitimacy of parental choices is explicitly recognised; ‘many parents have a valid preference…’ (p1). Parents are presented as being capable and entitled to exercise the rights listed in the charter. The frustration some parents have felt with regard to their powerlessness within the traditional education system in Ireland is evident on the first page of the charter, where *Bunreacht na hÉireann* is cited to justify parental demands. Onus is placed on the State in this document to support the establishment of *Educate Together* schools and to treat the *Educate Together* movement fairly, which implies that they were not supported or treated fairly in the past. Since much of the Charter is concerned with the entitlement of *Educate Together* to establish new schools, parent empowerment concerns arise more in relation to the place of the *Educate Together* movement in educational provision in Ireland, rather than in relation to the exercise of power in individual relationships between parents and teachers, although the latter is mentioned. Regardless, the need to prevent parent powerlessness in education that is discussed at national levels is likely to apply to school and individual relationships as well. The allusion to the past powerlessness of parents in terms of accessing the type of education they wanted for their children is important as it allows the *Educate Together* movement to argue for both parent power and parent-teacher partnerships, given that there needs to be a substantial rebalancing of the power relationship in favour of parents before partnership can be achieved. While an interest in parent empowerment with little comment on teacher empowerment might seem to be characteristic of managerial approaches to parent-teacher power relations, the history of the *Educate Together*
movement (and school patronage) in Ireland complicates this, allowing the argument that despite the strength of its parents’ rights agenda, the document is still in keeping with democratic discourses of parent-teacher power relations.

Arguably it is surprising that a parents’ rights agenda is not a stronger feature of the discourse, particularly in parent discourse sources. That it is not may indicate the influence of the traditional model and teacher discourses, in that advocating for parental involvement because of ‘parents’ rights’ might prove to be counter-productive given teacher concerns.

4.4.3 Democratic assumptions about the implementation of parental involvement in education in the documents analysed

4.4.3.1 Widened forms of involvement to ensure maximum participation

Identifying the degree to which parental involvement is envisaged in a broad sense in the documentation is complicated by the focus of many of the documents analysed on specific aspects of parental involvement. Issues of relevance may well explain the omission of wider models of participation from documents as much as underlying discourses. In any event some interest in widening forms of involvement to ensure maximum participation can be inferred from *Education for Tomorrow* (NPC-P 2010); *Mission, Vision and Values* (*Educate Together* 2004) and *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* (OECD Working Papers No 73. 2012).

*Education for Tomorrow* discusses a range of possible roles for parents in schools. Although the role of parents in relation to the education of their own children is included, most of the emphasis in the document is on collective rather than individual involvement, albeit unsurprising given the role of the NPC-P as a collective organisation of parents. Emphasis is placed on parental involvement in decision-making on Boards of Management and Parent Associations, and the inclusion of the word ‘truly’ in the statement that ‘Parents must be truly supported, trained and empowered to participate in the governance of primary schools through the Board of Management’ (p20) challenges the ‘rubber stamping’ role parents have had on these bodies in the past. The understanding that parents are to have a real role in school decision-making accords with democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations.

The approaches to school decision-making outlined in *Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values* are positioned as a more democratic alternative to the traditional, teacher and church run schools of the past. An overt concern with increasing the decision-making input of parents is evident; ‘parents are entitled to participate actively in decisions that affect the education of their children’. The importance of parental involvement in decision-making is a constant theme of the charter and, indeed, is one of the distinctive features of the *Educate Together* movement. This suggests that democratic constructions of parental involvement are influential.

*Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* notes the importance of ‘diversifying the activities for parents to be engaged in and making them independent of children’s
performance’ (p54). That the idea of separating parental involvement from children’s performance is included in a document that has a potentially narrow focus on how parental involvement might help children’s literacy attainments is significant. It allows for wider types of parental involvement than the academic focus of managerialism and, hence, implies democratic understandings.

The short-comings of the term ‘parental involvement’ are demonstrated by its treatment as a generic concept in many of the documents analysed. While details on a range of potential forms of involvement would seem to indicate democratic constructions in a document, as noted above the omission of such detail may relate more to topic relevance than discursive assumptions.

4.4.3.2 Deliberative forms of democracy
An interest in minority issues and possibly in parent representativeness can be identified in Mission, Value and Vision (Educate Together 2004). Parent representation at national levels is a concern of Parents as Partners in Education (DES 1991). Very tentatively deliberative approaches can be identified in How can we Make Schools Work Better? (World Bank 2012); Involve Parents, Improve School (EACEA 2009); Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011).

While issues of parent representation are not explicitly addressed in Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values, the affirmation that ‘parents are entitled to participate actively in decisions that affect the education of their children’ (p1), the emphasis on ‘respecting and celebrating the different and unique identities of all’ and the commitment to work ‘in a democratic way….to enable the highest level of partnership and participation’ (p2) indicate that parent representation is an issue of concern to the Educate Together movement. Similarly, the vision of education ‘based on the inclusive intercultural values of respect for difference and justice and equality’ (p2) implies an interest in the protection of minorities and the common good. The document does not specify how these aims are to be achieved, but such specification might be outside the remit of the charter. While there is no mention of Boards of Management or Parents’ Associations in the document, it would appear that the implementation of parental involvement remains within these traditional structures, albeit with more emphasis on parental involvement than traditionally. Since all primary schools in Ireland are obliged to fulfil DES requirements in terms of their management structures, an acceptance of such structures cannot be constituted as a rejection of more deliberative processes of democracy. Also it would not be pragmatic for the Educate Together movement, which is still working to ensure its legitimacy in the Irish education system, to attempt a radical challenge to the fundamental and widely accepted structures of that system.

The recommendation of Parents as Partners in Education that each Parents’ Association should affiliate with the NPC-P so as to ensure a voice in decision-making at national level indicates a concern with parent representation that is in accordance with democratic models. The interest in establishing Parent Associations suggest a similar concern with representation at school levels.
While the interventions described in *How can we Make Schools Work Better?* are more adversarial than deliberative in nature, nonetheless, issues of parent and teacher representativeness on the committee are discussed in the document. Part of the project discussed in the document involved facilitators working with committees to hold democratic elections, as well as setting quotas to ensure parental involvement (p3). Arguably, however, this interest in representativeness might have been inspired by a concern with legitimising the committees rather than arising from democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations.

The international aspect of *Involve Parents, Improve School* meant that it had to confine itself to ‘topics which were relatively independent of the differences in the participating countries’. Therefore, it has little discussion of parental involvement in school or educational decision-making, albeit the approach of the project itself indicates an interest in deliberative processes. ‘Consensual agreement’ (*IP-IS Final report* p16) as a means of decision-making is in line with a partnership approach (notwithstanding the limitations of the notion of ‘consensus’), while the modular approach (*IP-IS Final report* p17) allows participants the freedom to implement the ‘toolboxes’ of the project in a way suited to local conditions. Toolbox titles such as ‘Collaborating with parents’ and ‘Parents as partners; Parental involvement in everyday school life’, support the idea of a democratic approach.

Perhaps the consultation process implemented by the DES in relation to the draft version of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, where any interested party could submit a submission, demonstrates a commitment to deliberative democracy that is not particularly evident in the strategy itself. More cynically it could be argued that the consultation process was useful for identifying the parts of the draft strategy that would meet with most resistance, and these aspects could then be omitted from the final version, at least in the short term, to increase the chances of the rest of the plan being accepted and implemented at school level. Allowing parents and teachers a sense of influence over the drafting of the plan is likely to have contributed to a sense of ownership that would be useful from policymakers’ perspective with regard to strategy implementation also. Hence, the consultation process does not necessary infer the influence of democratic assumptions.

The tentative nature of the identification of deliberative forms of democracy in most of the above documents points to particular conundrum of democracy, that is whether a concern with democratic processes is inspired by a genuine interest in democracy, or whether it is merely a means to legitimate the actions of particular institutions (cf. Vincent 1993). That managerial discourses may underlie apparently democratic ones, therefore, needs to be borne in mind.

4.4.3.3 Genuine commitment to partnership assumed

The assumption that parents and teachers are genuinely committed to building good relationships with each other is apparent in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* (NCCA 2009) and *Mission, Vision and Values* (*Educate Together* 2004). That the genuine commitment of teachers and parents is necessary for implementing parental involvement in schools
Findings from the analysis of documentary and interview discourse sources

can be inferred from *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, (DES 2011); *Involve Parents, Improve School*, (EACEA 2009) and *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* (OECD Working Papers No 73. 2012).

*Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* devotes less than two pages of nineteen to persuading the reader of the merits of partnership, suggesting that a pre-existing commitment by parents and practitioners to good relationships is assumed. This supposition negates the need for partnership to be mandated or enforced through legislative means. Rather the document concentrates on explaining the benefits of partnership in terms of its advantages for children. Guidelines and examples of how it is to be achieved are then provided to motivate and support parents and practitioners. Only in the areas of Child Protection and regulation of pre-school services is reference made to the legal obligations of practitioners, which is indicative of the importance of these aspects for the safety of young children and their dominance in educational discourse. Otherwise, it is taken for granted that the desire to be a ‘good’ parent or practitioner will be adequate inducement for the reader to follow the recommendations of the document. While this acceptance of the importance of genuine commitment implies a democratic approach to parent-teacher relations, it may also be influenced by the structure and non-compulsory nature of early childhood education in Ireland. The document may also be preparing for a more mandated approach in the long-term, given that these guidelines and the *Aistear* curriculum framework itself form part of a process of the State taking control of early childhood education, in contrast to the past where it was seen as being entirely within the parents’ remit.

*Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values* assumes that the choice of *Educate Together* school by a parent or teacher implies a genuine commitment to partnership. Therefore, there is no sense that legislation or mandates are necessary or appropriate in achieving good relationships at school level. The description of *Educate Together* schools as a ‘distinctive response to the growing demand for such an option within the Irish educational system’ locates the *Educate Together* movement, and the provisions of its charter, in the context of a grassroots movement seeking to obtain access to schools that have an ‘atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect’. A sense of frustration with the historic denial of parental rights, and the treatment of the *Educate Together* movement in the past can be identified in the statement that ‘Multi-denominational school have the right to be treated no less favourably…’ which implies that they *were* treated less favourably than other schools in the past. Indeed, if a legislative approach is identified in this document, it is in relation to demanding that the State treat the *Educate Together* movement on a par with the other patronage bodies, and *Bunreacht na hÉireann* and *Declaration of Human Rights* is cited in this regard (p1). The document is concerned with getting a genuine commitment from the State to the principles of the *Educate Together* movement, but genuine commitment among parents and teachers at school level is taken for granted. Hence, democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations are inferred.
An awareness of the benefits of genuine commitment in terms of implementing the provisions of the strategy is apparent in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*. For instance, efforts are made to create a sense of urgency and necessity through the use of language of forcefulness and vigour, which distinguishes from the assumed inactivity of the past in relation to parental involvement. The use of the future tense implies a positive and certain attitude in relation to the potential of the strategy to achieve its aims and the frequent use of ‘we’ helps to create a sense of joint purpose, agreement and consensus. This is particularly relevant to the sidebars of text, which have an almost chatty, conspiratorial tone, contrasting with the more formal tone of the action plan. The appeals to common sense contained in the arguments for a more co-ordinated, coherent and connected approach to home-school links also seek to obtain reader agreement, rather than merely dictating a list of actions. Nonetheless, it must be noted these strategies may be more inspired by an interest in ensuring the implementation of the plan, rather than being based on democratic principles, and they do not challenge the mandated tone of the overall strategy.

Since the project described by *Involve Parents, Improve School* takes primarily a teacher education approach to the issue of increasing parental involvement in schools, it is concerned both with developing a genuine commitment among teachers to greater parental involvement, and also building on the genuine commitment that already exists among teachers and others in education. The specific addressing of student teachers, while in accordance with the focus on initial teacher education, acknowledges that novice teachers may be easier to influence than veteran ones, the latter likely having been socialised in school cultures that took a traditional approach to parent-teacher relations. A fit with democratic discourses is also implied by the advice that the trends and recommendations associated with parental involvement, should be a ‘sustainable development’ and ‘their [parents] acceptance in educational organisations will progressively support implementation’ ([IP-IS Final report](#)) p17. It appears, therefore, to be a bottom-up rather than top-down approach that is recommended.

Given the focus of *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* on parental involvement in the literacy development of their own child, it is unsurprising that ‘genuine commitment and active engagement’ (p51) on the part of parents is deemed essential. For schools too, the ‘opportunity to motivate’ (p54) parents towards literacy supportive activities is considered important. The comment on how ‘advantaged’ schools can drive parental involvement more effectively, and how in the absence of other distractions and challenges such schools can devote more time to encouraging parental involvement in the education of their own children (p41), allows for the possibility of school culture influencing actual levels of parental involvement, as well as its effects. The policy implications listed in the document centre the role of teachers, schools and governments in motivating and encouraging parents to become involved, rather than any suggestion that legislative approaches would be useful. Democratic influences can be inferred from this.
The recognition that to successfully develop meaningful parent-teacher relations requires the genuine commitment of all participants is an important pre-condition for the establishment of parent-teacher partnerships. That this is acknowledged by a variety of discourse sources is, therefore, notable.

4.4.3.4 Importance of interpersonal relationships, recognition of emotional realm

The interpersonal aspects of parent-teacher partnerships are strongly acknowledged in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* (NCCA 2009) and are implied in *Supporting Each Other* (NPC-P & IPPN 2010).

*Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* pays great attention to the development of good interpersonal relationships between parents and practitioners. The ‘thinking about my practice’ text boxes and reflective questions at the end of each ‘Learning Experience’ serve to present the development of close and mutually supportive relationships with each other as among the core duties of both parents and practitioners. Most of these encourage proactive behaviours in terms of relationships with others. The first and second person wording normalises particular practices as part of the parents’ or practitioners’ identity, and also encourages parents and practitioners to self-monitor in terms of their interactions with others in early childcare settings. The present tense is used almost everywhere in the document, further normalising the types of relationships described. Since the present tense is the tense of direction, its use allows much of the content of the document to be presented in the form of simple commands. An absence of any conditionality implies that if readers follow these instructions, then parent-practitioner partnerships will emerge for the benefit of all in the relationship.

Attention is also paid in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* to the emotional realm of parent-practitioner relationships, at least from the parents’ perspective. The positive and optimistic tone of the ‘Learning Experiences’ are designed to appeal to the emotions of parents and practitioners, as ensuring that children are happy in the setting is likely to be a core concern for all. All of the ‘Learning Experiences’ recount issues that were successfully resolved. More attention, however, is paid to the emotional issues faced by parents than those faced by practitioners who are seeking to develop relationships with parents. The advice that parents should give practitioners feedback (p13) is the only acknowledgement of practitioners’ need for support and encouragement. It is assumed that practitioners will always be available and able to engage with parents, and it is notable that while the time constraints which parents operate under are mentioned, this is not so for practitioners. For instance, the example of the ‘open-door policy’ where parents can ring the practitioner during lunch time (p14) does not allow for the practitioner getting lunch themselves, nor is there recognition that an early childcare practitioner minding a number of children may not be able to fully explore each child’s particular interests in the way that is described in the document. There is a sense, therefore, that practical considerations are not allowed to interfere with
one of the main purposes of the document, which is the discursive building of partnership relationships between parents and practitioners.

The five photographs in Supporting Each Other express the importance of positive interpersonal relationships, as all of them show two people (presumably principals and parents, although there are no definite markers of this) interacting with each other, and all those whose faces are visible are smiling and happy looking. These photographs, along with the colourful and attractive layout contribute to the upbeat tone of the document. The use of such images is likely to have a normalising effect, in that they imply that this is what parent-teacher/principal relationships should look like, as well as suggesting that they are happening in this way at present.

Given the centrality of interpersonal relations for parent-teacher partnerships, it is notable that only two documents recognise this, and they were both of Irish origin. In terms of acknowledging the importance of the emotional realm in discourses of parent-teacher relations it would appear that there is scope for significant improvement, therefore.

4.4.4 Democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations discussed in the interviews

4.4.4.1 Interview with senior INTO official

Democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations were more apparent in the interview with the INTO official than in Possibilities for Partnership. While the interviewee did not deny the past influence of traditional discourses, the thrust of his comments was that these no longer applied, and that parent-teacher partnership has been achieved in Irish education.

The interviewee was concerned with portraying contemporary parent-teacher relations in a positive light throughout the interview, e.g. ‘it’s very friendly and it’s first name terms and it’s informal’. Comments on tensions or challenges were always qualified with reference to the generally good relationships that exist, and problematic parent-teacher relations were depicted as a minority issue. The interviewee used the terms ‘partnership’ and ‘partner’ only once respectively, which indicates that he did not feel the need to emphasise the terminology of partnership when describing parent-teacher relations. Rather partnership was presented as a taken-for-granted assumption.

The emphasis placed on the importance of interpersonal relations between parents and teachers/principals in the interview was characteristic of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations. There was no sense from the interviewee that these relationships were seen as being open to being mandated, although he did explain that one of the motivations behind Possibilities for Partnership was a desire to formalise and systemise parental involvement in schools. The interviewee’s account implied that it was the communication structures that were formalised, however, rather than the actual interactions themselves. Comments on how the rules schools have with regard to meeting parents are often ‘honoured more in the breach than the observance’ can be viewed as the inverse of a managerial approach, as these ‘breaches’ allow for professional discretion and acknowledge that not all human interactions can be legislated, and so are more in keeping with the
flexible and interpersonal focus of democratic discourses. Similarly, the interviewee’s advice that trust takes a long time and effort to build up, and that if there are trusting relationships then mistakes can be more easily forgiven recognises the complexity of human interaction. Such recognition is likely to be essential for democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations to emerge.

As in Possibilities for Partnership, much of the justification for parental involvement in schools provided by the INTO interviewee related to the benefits it brings to children. Indeed, the interviewee recommended that initiatives be evaluated by questioning; ‘Is this of benefit to individual children and the group of children?’ with the benefit to the child being ‘at the end of the day the overriding issue’. Specific reference was made to parent-teacher relations centred on younger children, and to the importance of the creation of a ‘seamless transition’ between home and school, but there was no mention of the academic or attainment improvements that might occur as a result of it. This child centred justification of good parent-teacher relations is in keeping with a democratic construction of parent-teacher relations. It is possible, however, that too limited a focus on the direct benefits accruing to children might serve to downplay whole-school or decision-making involvement, and so allow teachers to retain control of parent-teacher relationships.

The notion of parents and teachers having complementary knowledge was more apparent in the interview than in Possibilities for Partnership. The interviewee stated ‘teachers realise that they can learn as much from a parent about the child as the parent can learn from them’. Parents, simply by virtue of their parenting role, were described as having ‘a valid viewpoint to put forward’. He also remarked that ‘schools run better’ when parents are involved, acknowledging whole-school level contributions. Little attention was paid to teacher knowledge during the interview, and arguably this suggests that the interviewee was so confident about the professional capacity of teachers that he did not feel obliged to discuss or defend their professional knowledge-base. This differs from the professional insecurity detected in Possibilities for Partnership. At one level this indicates a democratic construction of parent-teacher relations, where the possibility of mutual learning does not challenge the expertise of the teacher. Alternatively though the sense that teachers are not threatened by notions of parental knowledge might suggest they feel in control of the parent-teacher relationship, which would contradict the democratic inferences.

The association between teacher professionalism and engagement with parents was made more convincingly in the interview than in Possibilities for Partnership. While engagement with parents was not deemed an essential characteristic of teacher professionalism by the interviewee (as those ‘older’ teachers who were reluctant about parental involvement were explicitly described as ‘very, very, good professional teachers’), high levels of professionalism were seen to be necessary for meaningful interaction with parents. The competent, confident professional teacher’s relationship with parents was contrasted with that of the technicist professional. Specific reference was made to the downgrading of teacher professionalism in Britain, which has not occurred in Ireland to the same extent according to the interviewee. The interviewee was optimistic that initiatives such as School
Self-Evaluation could support teacher professionalism, although again wariness, perhaps of the traditional perspectives of some teachers, was inferred from his qualification that he ‘mightn’t be too popular for saying this with some people’. He asserted that respect for teachers in Ireland has been well-earned, as Irish teachers do not follow ‘fads or trends’, are ‘rightly critical of policy moves from central government or other sources’ and incorporate change ‘in a thoughtful, measured and useful manner’ in their classrooms. Interestingly, this understanding that a professional teacher is cautious about new initiatives provides a rationale as to why Irish teachers were reluctant to engage with the ‘new’ idea of parental involvement in the past, although the interviewee did not explicitly make this point. The contention that encouraging parental involvement requires more rather than less teacher professionalism inverts the reasons for teacher reluctance about parental involvement that the interviewee described as existing prior to 1997 and that were apparent in Possibilities for Partnership.

With regard to parent power at national level, the interviewee asserted that parents form an important lobby group in Irish education, being ‘an important vote for politicians’. In light of teacher concerns about parent power evident in Possibilities for Partnership, it might be expected that this would be regarded as threatening to teachers. However, no sense of this as threatening was inferred from the interview. The positioning of the INTO as a child advocate group as well as a trade union is interesting in this regard, as it allows the INTO to be seen as closely aligned with parental concerns. The INTO official described differences between the INTO and NPC-P in terms of ‘sometimes we have competing priorities’, and he referred to how both the INTO and NPC-P have had to ‘fight their corner’ in the past; for instance, through ‘set-tos on Morning Ireland’. Arguably this suggests fairly balanced power relations given that both organisations have the appropriate resources to access airtime on national radio. In general the positive nature of the relationship was emphasised and the interviewee was very complimentary of the work of the NPC-P, noting that parents in Ireland have been well served by their representatives. He contrasted this with other countries where there are no formal parent representative structures at national level.

The potential capacity building role of the school in the local community was greatly emphasised in the interview in a way not apparent in the document; ‘the role played by the school in not only defining but keeping a community living and breathing and working together and in touch with one another can’t be overstressed’. The effects of society on the school were also mentioned; for instance, with regard to the impact of the recession on schools. Admittedly the interest in improving teacher status that was a theme of the document was also apparent in the interview as the justifications for sharing the school building with the community included ‘they were looking at the work that was going on in the school and all of that enhanced the reputation of the school’. However, this point was presented as being secondary to the potential role of schools as the ‘heart’ of local communities. The

3 Current affairs radio programme on RTÉ 1
metaphor of the body implied pushes very strongly this aspect of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations.

Related to the above point, the interviewee discussed the benefits of having a large number of relatively small schools in the Irish primary education system. He attributed the number of schools as being ‘a huge factor’ in the ‘very healthy open relationship between parents and their primary schools’. The use of ‘their’ positioned parents as insiders in these schools. The interviewee contrasted his opinion on ‘this monster of a school’ with that of a ‘cold hearted accountant’ to whom a smaller amount of larger schools would make ‘economic sense’. This serves to contrast democratic and managerial discourses of school-community links. The use of parental involvement as a reason why small schools should not be closed is likely to be a powerful argumentation strategy, and allows the INTO to tap into the powerful lobby group of parents for support. Pragmatic reasons as well as democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations may, therefore, be influential.

It seems significant that the INTO position on the place of the school in the community is more unequivocally democratically-based than any of the other themes discussed. This can perhaps be related to the historically important role of the local school-master/mistress in Irish communities, or even to the locally organised branch structure of the INTO itself. Notably, however, most stress in the interview was placed on the role of the school in the community, rather than on the inverse. Since the former is likely to be on the school’s terms it does not greatly challenge traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations. This provides an example of discourse strands from two different discourses being in relative harmony, and in this case both being challenged by the implications of market-based managerialism, which were presented in the interview as threatening the positive school-community relationships that exist in Irish primary education.

The generally optimistic note struck throughout the interview regarding parental involvement contrasted with the cautious approach of Possibilities for Partnership. A number of reasons may explain this, among them an acceptance of the interviewee’s contention that teacher attitudes to parents have changed greatly in the past seventeen years. Perhaps the discursive assumptions of Possibilities for Partnership no longer apply, and the document is out of date. That the INTO are considering reviewing the document at the time of writing supports this contention (Nic Craith 2013). However, the accounts of the other interviewees with regard to continuing limited parental involvement in schools challenge this. If the parental involvement issue is accepted as ‘solved’ in Irish education, this reduces pressures on teachers to engage in new and more meaningful ways with parents. Presenting good relations between parents and teachers is, therefore, likely to accord with INTO priorities. As the interviewee was heavily involved in writing the document, the possibility of a divergence between personal and organisational perspectives’ does not seem to apply, albeit that the interviewee’s perspectives may have changed since the document was published. It is notable also that Possibilities for Partnership was a discussion document rather than a fully formed policy position. It had to appeal to a wide section of teacher opinion, and was, therefore, constrained in how
enthusiastically it could advocate parent-teacher partnership. The interviewee had much more freedom by contrast. The positionality of the interviewer as an INTO member researching parental involvement might also have influenced the discussion during the interview.

4.4.4.2 Interview with senior IPPN official

Democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations were influential in Supporting Each Other. Arguably the concern with parent-teacher conflict and bounding parental involvement that was inferred from the interview with the IPPN respondent caused it to have a less democratic tone. Nonetheless, some democratic assumptions were identified from the interviewee’s comments, especially with regard to the involvement of parents in the education of their own children.

As noted in Section 4.3.2 the understanding that parent-teacher relations have improved greatly in recent years was a theme of the interviewee’s account. For instance, he described the greater confidence that parents have in teachers and principals nowadays, and how they are likely now to come for advice and counselling and guidance from teachers. This implies that parents have a high trust for teachers and principals, and infers democratic constructions of the relationship. However, some of the interviewee’s comments suggested that this trust is not reciprocated by teachers, which challenges the democratic construction somewhat.

In common with Supporting Each Other, parental involvement in schools was mainly justified in the interview on the grounds of the joint endeavour of the home and the school in the education of children. By taking a parent-centric rather than school-centric approach to this relationship the interviewee challenged traditional and managerial constructions of parental involvement; ‘the school plays a role in the formal education of children but the role of the school is never ever going to be as strong as that of the parent’. Parents then are understood to be active in the parent-teacher relationship, with responsibility for parental involvement resting with them as well as the school. The benefits accruing to children were outlined in a holistic sense, with reference to how parents can motivate children and the possibility that parental involvement can help break the poverty cycle. The understanding that ‘parents have so much to offer by way of helping out the school, supporting the school, to ultimately enhance the standard of education in the school’ is characteristic of democratic discourses.

Regarding national level relationships, the interviewee described highly trusting and positive interactions between the IPPN and the NPC-P when he explained the background to, and process of, publishing Supporting Each Other. Mutual respect and admiration as well as good interpersonal relations were portrayed between the organisations. The interviewee was quite optimistic about the capacity of the NPC-P to exercise power at national level, noting that that the NPC-P ‘gets in there at government level very effectively’. Despite, however, claiming that ‘NPC punch way above their weight’ the interviewee also stated that he does not think that the NPC-P has enough say in education, listing their limited resources and the fact that many Parent Associations have not affiliated to them as
possible reasons for this. Nevertheless, his comments on the NPC-P implied that a democratic construction of parental involvement is pertinent at national policy-making levels.

Interestingly, less favourable comments were made with regard to the INTO, as it was described in terms of a trade union more interested in teacher working conditions than children’s interests. This construal may not be surprising given the competition that exists between IPPN and INTO, and admittedly the interviewee did stress that he did not mean to be ‘condemnatory in any way’ of the INTO. Nonetheless, that relationships at national level between principal representatives and parent representatives seem to be better than those between principal representatives and teacher representatives is notable as it might be expected that teacher and principal representatives would have more in common. An alliance between principals and parents would be unlikely to ease teacher fears with regard to managerial influences on Irish education, given the emphasis managerialism places on the role of school leaders. However, this may be related to the political dynamic between the organisations rather than saying anything about principal parent relationships per se.

When asked about European or international influences on parent-teacher relations, the interviewee did not identify much outside influence on policies of parental involvement. He noted that the United States tends to have a greater tradition of parental involvement than most European countries, but questioned whether this tradition of activity resulted in more than parents acting as ‘unpaid helpers’ in schools. Indeed, the interviewee paid more attention to influences from within Ireland when he offered the opinion that the Teaching Council is likely to be the body that will have most impact on Irish education in coming years, in terms of teacher effectiveness and the role of parents in ensuring teacher quality.

The IPPN respondent’s perspective seemed influenced by democratic constructions with regard to parental involvement in the education of their own children and at national policy-making levels. Absent, however, was a democratic construction of parental involvement in school level decision-making. Indeed, as discussed in Section 4.3.2 traditional concerns about bounding parental involvement seem relevant at this level. This omission would seem particularly significant given that Supporting Each Other primarily addressed school level parental involvement and it was directly discussed during the interview.

4.4.4.3 Interview with senior NPC-P official

Of all the discursive sources analysed, it was in the interview with the NPC-P respondent that democratic assumptions regarding parent-teacher relations were most strongly apparent. As noted in Section 4.6.3 this differed greatly from the managerial assumptions that were found to underpin Education for Tomorrow.

Notions of mutual responsibility, dialogue, different but complementary roles, and child-centredness were present in the definition of parent-teacher partnership provided by the NPC-P interviewee. The influence of the work of Joyce Epstein is clear in this understanding of partnership.
The interviewee described a pilot project that the NPC-P was involved in at the time of the interview, whereby the principles of Epstein’s National Network of Partnership Schools programme were being implemented in three schools in Ireland. This was presented as demonstrating the NPC-P commitment to re-defining how parent-teacher partnerships are understood in Irish education. Moving on from trying to explain partnership to actually embracing new ways of achieving partnerships and informing the education community about them is consistent with democratic principles, even if some managerial assumptions can be identified in the language of action teams, targets, measurability and public awards that accompany the programme itself.

As in Education for Tomorrow parental involvement in schools was justified in the interview on the grounds that ‘when parents are involved children do better’. Involvement in education was conceptualised as being part of a parent’s role, with the interviewee noting that ‘you also need to parent your child through education’, just as through other aspects of life. Since the objective of this parenting is to let children become ‘self-sustaining, independent adults’ a narrow attainment driven focus is not relevant. The differentiation of ‘parenting through education’ from ‘teaching’ serves to avoid traditional concerns about parental involvement threatening teacher professionalism. It also indicates a view of teacher and parent knowledge as complementary to the other, and so is characteristic of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations.

The interviewee’s description of how parents can help their children’s learning is notable in that a compensatory or deficit model was rejected. She commented on how parents can support their children regardless of their own academic ability and how the ‘high-achieving parent’ may in fact be at risk of pressurising their children unduly. Her use of ‘academic/non-academic’ to differentiate family circumstances is interesting, in that it avoids the socio-economic based distinctions that are often associated with deficit models of parents, while at the same time recognising that the home backgrounds of children factor in educational success. The sense that anyone can be ‘an expert as a parent’ implies an inherently optimistic stance about the potential benefits of parental involvement in schools. The interviewee discussed the school’s responsibility to support parents, describing, for instance, how homework should let the child and parent engage with the learning of the day rather than requiring the parent to have specific content knowledge. Parent education, such as it is relevant then, relates to developing ‘a common understanding and value and belief that this [parental involvement] is right for children’ and is also applicable to teachers and policy-makers. Indeed, the interviewee discussed at length the NPC-P’s contribution to teacher education with regard to parental involvement, which inverts the more usual teacher-to-parent direction of education. She discussed this teacher education as part of the solution to the problem that arises when parents, interested in partnership, are ‘hitting into schools that don’t understand what they’re on about…’ Her stance on parent education is in accordance with democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. However, it does seem somewhat contradictory of the statement in Education for Tomorrow that in order to support children’s education at home parents need information on ‘concepts, attitudes and knowledge
required for pupils in all subjects at each grade’ as that implied a more managerially inspired parent education model.

Arguably the interviewee bridged the possible tension between the whole-school nature of Parents’ Associations and the individual nature of involvement in children’s learning when she explained that Parents’ Associations ‘should be a peer group to support other parents to be engaged in their children’s learning’. This connection between the collective and the individual was notably absent from other discourse sources. A sense that Parents’ Council members were understood to be parent leaders in the school was inferred from the interviewee’s comments. This positions parents as pro-active in the school, and seems more democratically inspired than if parents were positioned as waiting for the actions of the school/teachers to empower them. It contrasts with the passivisation of parents noted in *Education for Tomorrow*.

The need for good relationships between parents and teachers if partnership is to develop was a much more obvious theme of the interview than *Education for Tomorrow* and again highlights the democratic assumptions underpinning the interview. For instance, the interviewee discussed how parent-teacher meetings should ‘just flow’ from the on-going relationship between the teacher and the parent, rather than being a performance that teachers put on for parents. An interest in the process as well as the product of parent-teacher relations was also apparent. The interviewee explained how ‘the actual consultation piece of work behind the document [*Supporting Each Other*] was nearly more important than the document itself’, as it allowed principals and parents to work together to find common understandings. She noted that *Supporting Each Other* is ‘not a very dictating document, it’s more around communication’. This recognition of the interpersonal dimension involves quite a different emphasis from that inferred from *Education for Tomorrow*.

With regard to the implementation of parental involvement in schools it is notable that the interviewee’s approach to parents in classrooms differed markedly from that of *Education for Tomorrow*. The document’s discrete section on volunteering gave the impression that parents’ involvement in schools and classrooms was a core part of its definition of parental involvement. In contrast the interviewee was much more cautious; ‘parents in the classroom may or may not happen, and it’s debatable about whether it’s desirable or not’. This acknowledges teacher discomfort with the notion of parents’ physical presence in the classroom, and how parental involvement can be seen as a threat to the professional expertise of the teacher. It also implies a trust for teachers’ capacity to fulfil their professional roles without direct parental assistance.

The NPC-P respondent was not satisfied with the adequacy of existing formal structures in Irish schools for the implementation of parental involvement as she defined it. A similar sense of inadequacy was inferred from *Education for Tomorrow*. The interviewee was critical of how current educational policies tend to focus on ‘the structural piece’ rather than ‘the relationship piece between the school and the parents’ although, interestingly, she saw this absence as being resolved through legislative means, which seems somewhat contradictory. Since existing arrangements for parental
involvement are ‘by their very nature very structural rather than engaging’, the interviewee discussed approaches to presenting school policy-making in a way that made it interesting for parents to become involved in. She commented on how the formal structures of the Parents’ Association and Board of Management have ‘been so ingrained over the years that they’re not actually always involved in decision-making’. This indicates that the strength of the traditional is hampering the development of new approaches. Moving away from only considering parental involvement within the limitations of formal structures suggests an interest in widening participation that is in accordance with democratic constructions of parental involvement. The interviewee’s remarks also imply, however, that parents are not interested in or are not participating in school level policy-making at the present time, and so that democratic discourses are not dominant at school level.

An interest in ensuring that the NPC-P is broadly representative of parents was apparent in the interviewee’s description of the organisation’s structure. She discussed, for instance, how a geographical spread of Assembly members is achieved and how the Assembly has representatives from ‘special interest groups’ ‘so the policy doesn’t become too mainstream’. That the Assembly itself decides the issues it is going to debate likely contributes to its capacity to address sectional interests as well. While this concern with representativeness is in accordance with democratic principles, notably the Education Consultant interviewed suggested that the NPC-P have not actually succeeded in ensuring parent representativeness, particularly at school level.

With regard to parental influence at national levels in Irish education, the interviewee noted how the place of parental involvement on policy agendas has ‘definitely increased over the years’. The notion of parents being involved in the relevant ‘conversations’ at national level was a recurring theme of the interview; ‘I think our voice is respected within the Department and I definitely think it’s respected among other educational partners’. She spoke favourably about the then Minister for Education’s response to NPC-P submissions and interest in improving parental involvement in schools. The interviewee’s sense of being listened to by personnel in the DES contrasted markedly with that of the Educate Together interviewee. According to the NPC-P respondent the difference between the draft and final version of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life was an example of a policy where changing attitudes to parents could be detected. Evidence of the ‘very good working relationship’ with the Department was also provided in relation to the How can Primary Schools Make All Children Feel Included and Involved? initiative of 2013/14. The pamphlet associated with this consultation process carried both the NPC-P and DES logos and the interviewee explained that the DES contacted the NPC-P and asked them if they would help support the message getting out to parents. She commented on the significance of this as demonstrating the weight and respect that the DES perceives the NPC-P to have with parents. Similarly, the interviewee discussed how the DES and NPC-P have worked together on providing information to parents on Junior Cycle reform. The ‘long hard slog’ that the NPC-P undertook to get to the policy-making table is yielding results then, according to her account. While the inclusion of parents in policy-making seems likely to be
influenced by democratic constructions of parental involvement, a critical interrogation of such inclusion does raise the possibilities of managerial undertones, as discussed in Section 6.3.

Aside from the direct influence of the DES, the increasing power of the NPC-P in national policy-making can also be attributed to other factors. For instance, it can be contended that the reforms undertaken by the NPC-P regarding its structures, procedures and approaches in recent years have improved its capacity to exercise power at national levels. Indeed, the interviewee’s account of the rather haphazard, parochial and sometimes contradictory way in which motions were passed by the NPC-P prior to these reforms raises the possibility that this might have been a factor in their exclusion from school and educational policy-making in the past. That the reforms were instigated by the interviewee has to be borne in mind, however, as this makes it likely she would regard them favourably. The interviewee discussed at length the efforts of the NPC-P Assembly to ensure that its members are adequately informed of the relevant issues before making decisions. The calibre of the experts that the interviewee listed as having spoken to the Assembly, and the time allocated for parents to question those experts, indicates the seriousness with which the NPC-P addresses the issue. This process raises questions as to how susceptible the parent voice is to influence from the experts chosen to address them, although the Education Consultant dismissed the likelihood of undue external influences. In any event, it is possible that practical considerations relating to NPC-P capacity may be among the factors that influenced its greater involvement in national policy-making in recent years.

In the interviewee’s explanation, much of the NPC-P’s capacity to exercise power in national policy-making is related to its ability to influence public opinion. The need to use this power ‘very carefully and responsibly’ was mentioned. The interviewee stated that the NPC-P prefer to do their campaigning ‘around the table where we’re having a discussion rather than either protests outside of a gate or putting out press statements’, describing such actions as ‘a very very last resort’. An interest in maintaining good relationships with the DES might be inferred from this comment, as well perhaps as some criticism of those who employ more aggressive methods of negotiation. Notwithstanding the significance of the power to affect public discourse, the possibility of the DES making use of the NPC-P’s broad base of parental membership to achieve its own ends, as in a managerial construction of parent-teacher relations, seems possible as well, however.

While there was considerable evidence provided during the interview of the NPC-P’s capacity to exercise power at national levels, that power is not unconstrained. For instance, the interviewee contrasted the power of the NPC-P to influence public opinion with the greater power of those that can withdraw the workforce from the education system. This leads to ‘the sense that some people have more weight around the table because of the final card they have to throw’. The NPC-P’s inability to access funding from its members causes it to be ‘massively underfunded’ in comparison to the other educational partners and the small size of its staff also affects its policy-making contribution. These power imbalances raise questions as to the degree to which the NPC-P’s influence at national level can be attributed to the DES allowing them to exercise that influence. That the NPC-P was originally
established by, and is funded by, the DES seems relevant. Further questions then arise as to whether the DES is inspired by democratic or managerial assumptions in this regard, although this concern did not feature in the interviewee’s comments.

Regardless of its discursive underpinnings, the interviewee observed that the place of parents in national level policy-making in Ireland is ‘much further on’ than that of parents in many other European countries, to the extent that the Irish situation has been described as ‘the Rolls Royce of parental involvement’. The interviewee listed a number of European conferences at which she has been invited to speak, because the position of parents in Irish policy-making is regarded as ‘very innovative and progressive’. The notion that the NPC-P has ‘quite an influence’ in terms of parental involvement in Europe is noteworthy, given the tendency to assume that Ireland is influenced in policy terms by Europe rather than vice versa. It also serves to put the difference in the role of parents at school levels and at national levels in Ireland into even sharper focus.

The NPC-P interviewee’s approach to parent-teacher relations is heavily influenced by democratic constructions, although the influence of managerialism in Irish education could be inferred from some aspects of her account. Possible reasons why the discursive assumptions of the NPC-P interviewee differed so greatly from that of the NPC-P’s policy document Education for Tomorrow are outlined in Sections 4.3.3 and 4.6.3 and do not need to be repeated here.

4.4.4.4 Interview with senior ‘Educate Together’ official

As was expected from the analysis of the Educate Together charter, democratic assumptions of parent-teacher relations were strongly apparent in the Educate Together respondent’s account.

In common with the charter, parental involvement was justified by the interviewee due to the joint endeavour of the home and the school in educating the child. She described parental involvement as having to be ‘core to the school’ and as ‘a lifeblood running through the school’. This holistic and child-centred approach is in accordance with democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. Very practical reasons as to why parental involvement is essential in schools were also listed, including accessing volunteers to go on Boards of Management and, interestingly, fundraising. While these may not be as democratically inspired, they do not contradict democratic justifications either.

Since both parents and teachers are positioned in this understanding of partnership as having to ‘work out what is the best for your kids and how you’re going to achieve it’, unsurprisingly the interviewee placed major emphasis on the importance of good interpersonal relations. The importance of good communication between parents and teachers was one of the main themes of the interview. Interestingly, however, and has been noted in Section 4.3.4.4, negative parent-teacher relations were an undercurrent in the interviewee’s comments. The phrasing of the comment ‘you know the teachers respect the parents and the parents have to respect the teachers’ is interesting, in that it assumes teachers will respect parents, whereas there is some doubt as to whether parents will be reciprocally respectful. Admittedly, however, the interviewee did not ignore the culpability of teachers either for
poor relationships. Indeed, she remarked on the importance of recruitment for *Educate Together* schools in terms of having staff who are willing to engage with parents. The role of principals in modelling good communication practices and empowering teachers to engage with parents was also discussed. While the ideal of parent-teacher relationships presented by the interviewee involves a ‘two way flow of respect and kindness’ in keeping with democratic principles, there was a sense from her comments that this is not yet guaranteed in Irish schools.

In discussing the power relationship between parents and teachers the interviewee noted how it is ‘not as simple as it seems to be’. She discussed how power ‘if it’s in any way going to be effective has to be negotiated’. As well as providing a justification for parental involvement in schools, such an approach rules out the mandating of parental involvement. The interviewee directly challenged managerial approaches to parent-teacher relations when she stated ‘if you have to cite legislation or rules and regulations you’ve lost it anyway’. The complexity of democracy could be inferred from the interviewee’s explanation of how sometimes parents who have been involved in the establishment of *Educate Together* schools are not happy once the school actually opens and end up parting ways with it because ‘we can’t do everything we want to do’. Not only do democratic constructions involve the negotiation of power relations with teachers, Boards of Management and other parents, but they are also constrained by the *Rules for National Schools* within which primary schools operate, as the interviewee pointed out. This acknowledgement of the complexity of power is of itself a pre-condition for parent-teacher partnership. Again, however, the possibility of difficult relationships can be inferred from these comments.

The interviewee’s discussion of how the *Educate Together* movement is now accepted by the educational partners and the general public in a way that it was not in the past perhaps indicates the increasing influence of democratic constructions in Irish education. She noted how *Educate Together* is no longer associated with ‘that crazy school, those outsiders’ and how principals of *Educate Together* schools no longer feel as isolated by their principal peers as they did in the early years. The interviewee also described good relationships with the other management and patronage bodies. Arguably, however, such changes might be as much to do with the resilience of the *Educate Together* movement and with societal change as indicating the emergence of more democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations.

Interestingly, the interviewee’s account of *Educate Together*’s involvement at national policy-making levels did not imply that democratic discourses were prevalent. Although she outlined how ‘a lot of the things we’ve put forward as interesting ideas have come to fruition’ she also noted how the movement has not gotten credit for them. Her description of how the management bodies interact with other so as to prevent the DES from doing ‘a divide and conquer kind of thing’ certainly does not imply that democratic constructions are prevalent in national level decision-making. The exasperation evident in the interviewee’s narrative of her dealings with the DES is notable given that *Educate Together* has been very successful in obtaining the patronage of schools in recent years. It echoes the
frustration inferred from the Charter that the Educate Together movement was not treated fairly in the past. The contrast between the Educate Together account and that of the NPC-P interviewee is striking in this regard, and again raises questions as to the extent that democratic discourses are driving the inclusion of the NPC-P at national level. Since, however, the interviewee positioned Educate Together as a management body rather than a parents’ representative organisation, this aspect of her account may relate more to the relationship between the DES and management bodies than to parental involvement.

The Educate Together interviewee, as expected, described parental involvement from a democratic stance. However, her account suggests that such democratic constructions have not yet been achieved in Irish schools, perhaps not even in Educate Together schools. Unlike other interviewees, her account inferred that they might not be prevalent at national levels either.

4.4.4.5 Interview with Education Consultant

Although some managerial assumptions about the exercise of power in Irish education were inferred from the Education Consultant’s comments, democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations were also apparent in her discussion of parental involvement.

As outlined in Section 4.3.5, the Education Consultant’s description of the establishment of the NPC-P allowed for democratic discourses of parental involvement being influential in Irish education since the 1970s, even if they were not dominant. As also discussed in that section, however, questions arise from the interviewee’s account as to the extent that the NPC-P were exploited by other more powerful organisations to further their agendas although, notably, the interviewee stated that the NPC-P were not unhappy about that. The interviewee discussed how the NPC-P was able to move the debate away from something to do with power positions to focus on ‘What can we do together to strengthen the quality of children’s educational experience?’ She explained that ‘it’s very hard to fight with people on those terms’ and so according to her good relationships developed at national level from early on in the existence of the NPC-P. That a democratic construction of parent-teacher relations influenced the early development of parental involvement in Irish schools is not denied, therefore, even if it is possible that it was also influenced by other concerns.

A strongly child centred justification for parental involvement was apparent in the interviewee’s comments, with the need for continuity between the home and school emphasised; ‘a child is a single entity so a child centred education process would be one where all the adults in their lives are working out of a common picture’. Parental involvement then is being linked to one of the underpinning assumptions of Irish primary education, that of child-centredness. The understanding that parents and teachers have to devise a ‘common vision’ for the child requires negotiation and mutual responsibility, in keeping with democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. This is, however, more applicable to individual level involvement than to school or national levels.
The interviewee described ‘the teacher as a professional’ as being ‘dependent for the exercise of their professionalism on alliances’ with the people who matter in children’s lives. Arising from this the interviewee explained that there should be no tension between the teacher as a professional and as someone who invites the parent into that relationship. She mentioned the concept of ‘autonomy within community’ as a way of explaining how parental involvement does not have to be positioned as contrary to teacher autonomy. This association of teacher professionalism and parental involvement is characteristic of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations. Interestingly, aside from the cautious treatment of it in the INTO document, none of the other discursive sources made this link between teacher professionalism and parent-teacher partnership. Arguably its absence from educational debate suggests that the concept has not yet been fully explored in Irish education.

With regard to the place of the school in the community the interviewee espoused a very strongly democratic vision of home-school relationships. As well as positioning the school as a capacity builder for its local community in terms of allowing community access to its resources, she also discussed the notion of ‘a community primary school’. This model involves a single building being used by various patronage groups and educational providers, with shared spaces to allow for integration and mainstreaming. While undoubtedly this model would have complex implications for primary education in Ireland, its advancement demonstrates a willingness to move away from historical models of educational provision. Arguably such a disposition is essential for the development of genuinely democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. The presence of this approach in the account of the Education Consultant highlights the absence of much challenge to taken-for-granted assumptions about educational provision in the other discourse sources analysed.

The notion that democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations are most apparent at national policy-making levels was supported by the interviewee’s comments. She listed a number of areas where the NPC-P was influential, such as the Primary Education Review Body, the National Educational Convention, ‘on a whole raft of education bodies’ and in ‘actually crafting the provisions of the Education Act’. However, when the interviewee discussed the NPC-P’s failures, these mainly related to school level aspects of the education system, both in relation to involvement at whole-school level and in getting implemented at school level things that had been agreed at national level. In discussing the importance of collective parental involvement at school level, the interviewee noted how parents having a meaningful voice into school policy and practice is ‘still hugely aspirational in Ireland’. That principals tend to fear collective more than individual involvement was also remarked upon. She stated that ‘making the case for parents to have a say in school policy has always been the challenge’. When compared with the apparent acceptance of parental involvement at national level, this supports the contention that different discourses are operating at school than at national levels with regard to the role of parents.

In common with the NPC-P interviewee, the Education Consultant perceived Irish approaches to parental involvement to be influential on European education rather than vice versa. That the
European Parents’ Association ‘was in its infancy’ at the same time as the NPC-P, and that NPC-P personnel became very involved in it, affected the direction of influence, according to her. The interviewee discussed trips to England to talk to parents’ groups there. While she mentioned international experts who have informed the NPC-P, the interviewee was of the opinion that the NPC-P’s ethos is strong enough ‘to protect the organisation from being unduly swayed by individuals’. The sense of strength associated with democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations at national level makes their possible weakness at school level all the more interesting.

The influence of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations was apparent in the Education Consultant’s account, but the limitations of that influence were also obvious, particularly regarding whole-school level interactions.

4.4.4.6. Interview with Senior Inspector

While the Senior Inspector’s account indicated the influence of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations in Irish education and on the Inspectorate’s approach, the limits of such constructions were also apparent, particularly at school level.

In common with the findings from other sources, the Inspector’s discussion of parental involvement suggested that democratic discourses are more apparent at some levels of the educational system than others. She referred, for instance, to how the DES regards parent representatives as ‘equal partners’ and provided examples of the influence parents have at national level. However, she also commented on how schools are not fully maximising the resource that Parents’ Associations offer and the limited nature of much parental involvement in schools. This indicates that parental involvement may be constructed more democratically at national level than at school level. Similarly, the Inspector spoke of the increasing momentum behind parent voice and how there is greater societal awareness of the importance of parental involvement, as well as the extensive rights enjoyed by parents under the 1998 Education Act. In spite of this, parents were seen as not exercising these rights, for a variety of reasons. This perception that ‘a kind of landscape has been created and planted but it hasn’t yet really fully developed’ provides evidence of a gap between policy and practice approaches to parental involvement in Irish education.

The influence of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations on the interviewee was apparent in much of her account. A generic reference was made to the research evidence that shows children ‘do much better’ when parents are actively involved. She emphasised the need for schools to share power and knowledge with parents and to allow parents to participate meaningfully in decision-making. The mutual responsibility of parents and schools was a recurrent theme throughout the interview and, indeed, her concern with activising parents was a notable feature of the discussion. The complexity and challenges of developing such a model of involvement were acknowledged by the Inspector as requiring a shift in the conception of learning itself so that it is understood in a social context. That the changes needed to develop new forms of parent-teacher relationship appear
deceptively simple, despite actually requiring ‘a massive culture change’ was a challenge also observed by the inspector. The identification of the need for this ‘massive culture change’ aptly sums up the limited nature of democratic constructions at school level.

4.4.4.7 Interview with senior NCCA official

As expected from the analysis of Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners, the NCCA respondent placed great emphasis on the role of parents in education. She highlighted how partnership with parents is one of the principles ‘informing and underpinning Aistear’ and so much of her discussion was in accordance with democratic perspectives on the parent-teacher relationship. As noted in Section 4.8.7, the interviewee’s contention that Aistear is having an influence on curricular policy more broadly is significant, as the democratic principles identified in it have relevance then for the education system generally and not just the 0-6 years sector.

While a parent education model was evident in the interviewee’s comments and, indeed, she discussed the role of the NCCA in parent education terms, she conceptualised parental involvement in broader terms than merely involving parent education. For instance, when discussing the NCCA’s input into work around the transition from pre-school to primary school, the interviewee noted that ‘we’re looking at that transition point being less maybe about a tool-kit, although it should include some tools and resources, and more about kind of systems, processes and procedures really…’. She also made a number of references to the ‘voice’ of parents, implying a more meaningful role for them than just subjects to be educated.

In common with the other interviewees, the NCCA respondent discussed the involvement of parents in national policy-making, providing examples, for instance, of how the NCCA and NPC-P have worked together on various initiatives. While this supports the view that democratic discourses influence parental involvement at national levels, power differentials among the various stakeholders complicate this. If some groups are positioned in ways that allow them to exercise power more readily than others this can have negative implications for the genuinely democratic involvement of parents, and provides for the possibility of managerial approaches underlying ostensibly democratic ones.

4.4.5 Concluding remarks regarding democratic constructions in the sources analysed

Arising from the documentary discourse analysis and analysis of the interview transcripts, a number of observations about the influence of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations can be made. While it can be summarised that democratic discourses of parental involvement are most applicable at national policy-making levels, with traditional discourses dominant at school level, it is likely that this summary would not reflect the scale of the complexity involved.

There was considerable evidence found of parents’ representatives exerting an influence on national educational policy. Across all of the Irish discursive sources the contribution of parents at that level was acknowledged and accepted, and their involvement was described in democratic terms. The
sense that parents’ representatives feel valued and included by the other educational partners was apparent. This supports the contention that democratic discourses are dominant at national decision-making levels.

Notwithstanding this, however, the possibility of more managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations also being present at national levels must be considered. That the parent lobby provides a counterbalance to the historical power of the teacher unions in Irish education makes them a useful ally from government perspectives. Parent power may be encouraged and allowed only in so far as it furthers the aims of more powerful stakeholders.

Even if parental involvement at national levels is inspired by democratic principles, the difficulty in implementing at school level the decisions made at national level demonstrates a limit to their influence. There is a tension inherent in making decisions democratically at national level but then having to use managerial approaches in order to achieve (partial) implementation at school levels. The gap between practice and policy in Irish education was a theme in many of the interviews. Comparing the analysis of the documentation with that of the interviews drew attention to that gulf as well. Differences were identified between those at national level in organisations who know what is discursively legitimate to say, and members at school level who have different perspectives.

At school level then democratic discourses are not as dominant as they appear to be at national level. However, this point needs to be clarified by considering individual parent-teacher relations that centre on particular children separately from whole-school or collective forms of parental involvement in schools. Indeed, it would appear that with regard to individual parent-teacher relations there is a discursive acceptance of democratic constructions. All of the interviewees and most of the Irish documents justified parental involvement in their own children’s education in terms of holistic benefits accruing to the child, amid the joint endeavour and mutual responsibility of the home and the school. So dominant is the discursive strand that justifies parental involvement in the education of their own children that it would appear to be outside of the discursive limits to dispute it. Yet the interviewees’ accounts suggest that traditional concerns about parental involvement cause practices at individual levels to vary widely, despite this discursive acceptance.

Collective forms of parental involvement at whole-school level seem least susceptible to democratic constructions, either discursively or in practice. It is notable that while many of the interviewees were happy to address individual and national level relationships, there was a tendency to omit whole-school ones or treat them very cautiously. The problems of the Board of Management system were frequently raised. The sense that teachers feel threatened by parental involvement in school level decision-making, and that parents have little interest in school policy-making indicates that traditional rather than democratic approaches are dominant at this level. Emphasising the benefits of parental involvement for individual children may be a useful discursive strategy for minimising the importance of whole-school forms of involvement. That democratic discourses are not dominant at whole-school level is significant given that for most parents decisions made at school level are likely
to have more impact on their daily lives and those of their children than those at national level, even if the former appear trivial by comparison.

The limited nature of international discourse sources constrains extensive comment on the parental involvement outside of Ireland. It is notable, however, that despite the uneven influence of democratic constructions in Irish education, Ireland is regarded as progressive in terms of its approach to parents by parents’ groups in other countries. This provides an interesting context when critiquing the limits of democratic discourses in Irish schools.

4.5 Concluding comments on research findings

The above account of the findings of the discourse analysis undertaken on the documentary and interview sources reveals the complicated and inter-discursive nature of the influences that construct discourses of parent-teacher relations in Irish education. Various documents and interviewees are influenced by different discourse strands in their justification of parental involvement, in their conceptualisation of power relations between parents and teachers, and in their assumptions about how parental involvement should be implemented in schools and at national level. Some necessary work was undertaken during the presentation of findings to identify patterns that aid understanding of the way in which meaning and practice are discursively constructed with regard to parent-teacher relations. It remains necessary, however, to explore the research questions more explicitly with regard to the Discourse of Parent-Teacher relations as a whole, and to make more direct associations between the above findings and issues discussed in Chapter 2, in order to more fully understand parent-teacher relations in Irish education. This is addressed in the next chapter.
5. Analysis of the discursive plane of parent-teacher relations

5.1 Introduction to chapter

The discussion of the discursive construction of parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education has proceeded thus far on the basis that three separate principal discourses can be identified and usefully separated out. Discourse sources (document or interview data) have also been discussed on a separate basis. While necessary for explanatory and clarification purposes, such a separate approach is, nevertheless, limited and artificial, given the intertwined and complex nature of discourse. Since discourses and discourse strands never exist in isolation from each other, it is essential to consider the discursive plane of parent-teacher relations as a whole in seeking to explore the research questions more precisely. This is in accordance with DHA perspectives which recognise that categories of discourse cannot be regarded as fixed or stable (cf. Reisigl & Wodak 2009:95). It is also in keeping with the Foucauldian requirement to analyse the ‘whole discursive formation to which a text or practice belongs’ (Hall 2001:78).

Arising from the Foucauldian understanding of discourse outlined in Section 2.6.1, six key ‘truth-claims’ (Taylor 2001:11,12) about discourse are identifiable. In keeping with the hermeneutic approach that Wodak (1999) described as a necessary part of discourse work, these truth-claims are helpful in assisting understandings of parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education;

- Discourses are more than just language and have real effects (cf. Jäger & Maier 2009).
- Legitimating principles or ‘rules’ of discourse enable and constrain what can be said and thought, thereby setting the discursive limits (cf. Jóhannesson 2010; Jäger & Maier 2009).
- Discourses provide a set of norms against which behaviour can be measured. These act as disciplinary techniques regulating the behaviour of subjects (cf. Carabine 2001).
- Power in discourse operates in a net-like structure, where everyone is a vehicle of power. Power can be both positive and negative (cf. Hall 2001).
- Strategies of legitimation allow discourses to become reified and dominant (cf. Van Leeuwen 2007).

These truth-claims point to an understanding of discourse as complex, entangled and in a constant state of flux. Each is discussed in turn below with regard to the discursive plane of parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education. It is acknowledged that even this approach involves some artificiality, in that legitimating principles/truths/norms cannot be as easily separated and classified as this approach suggests. Nonetheless, for ease of explanation and clarity some categorisation is required.

The understanding that discourses have real effects and are produced in the context of legitimating principles allows the first research question (Do discourses of parental involvement and
teacher professionalism construct parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education?) to be addressed. The second research question (What implications do these constructions have for policies and practices of parent-teacher relationships, particularly parent-teacher partnerships, in Irish primary education?) is explored through examining the ‘truths’ and ‘norms’ produced by and in discourse and the way power is exercised discursively. Having examined the first two questions, the third question (How can these constructions be challenged and/or supported to enhance parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish primary education?) can then be considered with regard to discursive strategies of legitimation.

The discursive plane of parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education, as understood from the research, is summarised below. It is in light of this understanding of the discursive plane that the research questions are explored in succession.

5.2 The discursive plane of parent-teacher relations

In terms of accessing the discourse, as always it must be borne in mind that each individual’s (whether author, interviewee or, indeed, the researcher herself) personal and organisational experience and their discursive repertoire will influence how they interpret, shape and reflect the discourse. This means that any claim to understand the discourse must be made in tentative form. Nonetheless, patterns across the discursive sources examined suggest that parent-teacher relations at various levels of the Irish primary education system are constructed in the context of the discursive strands outlined below.

| Individual level involvement | *Discursive acceptance of the importance of parental involvement (Dem)*  
|                             | *Parental involvement understood in holistic sense, not just related to children’s academic attainment (Dem)*  
|                             | *Parent education model present (Trad/Man)*  
|                             | *Anecdotal evidence that practice varies widely – teachers understood to have capacity to exercise autonomy (Trad/Dem)*  
|                             | *Interest in maintaining teacher control/guidance of parental involvement (Trad)*  
| Whole-school level involvement | *Parental involvement talked about cautiously as ‘good’ (Dem/Trad)*  
|                             | *Wariness, teacher fear of parental involvement apparent (Trad)*  
|                             | *Strong sense that teachers/schools need to maintain control of parent involvement (Trad)*  
|                             | *‘Safe’ involvement present (Trad)*  
|                             | *Potential for negative relationships/conflict foregrounded (Trad/Man)*  
|                             | *Some difficulty in explaining how educational aims of school are advanced through whole-school involvement – confusion over definition (Trad)*  
|                             | *Anecdotal evidence that practice varies widely – schools have capacity to resist, even legislative requirements can be resisted (Trad/Man)*  
| National level involvement  | *Discursive acceptance of parental involvement (Dem)*  
|                             | *Evidence of parent representatives making meaningful contributions and being regarded as equal partners (Dem)*  
|                             | *Enthusiasm and inclusion rather than wariness and restraint evident (Dem)*  
|                             | *This has been achieved through the direct intervention and insistence of the DES (?Man)*  

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Table 4: The discursive plane of parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education as revealed during the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supra-national / international levels</th>
<th>Informants did not identify outside influences <em>directly</em> on parental involvement per se (Trad/Dem)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Idea that Ireland is seen as leader in Europe regarding democratic involvement of parents – interesting context (Dem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Much stronger managerial assumptions regarding parental involvement evident in documents from outside of Ireland (Man)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The different influences on national as opposed to individual or school level involvement are obvious from the table. Even though school level involvement is characterised by a combination of traditional and democratic influences, a variation in the strength of the influence of each discourse can be identified depending on whether the involvement is of an individual or collective type. Despite the apparently democratic influences at national level, managerial discourses from outside of Ireland are likely to be exerting some influence at this level, even if the informants could not precisely identify how.

5.3 Do the discourses of parental involvement and teacher professionalism construct parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education?

Although all of the key truth-claims about discourse could serve to explore this first research question, the exploration below focusses on the Foucauldian contention that discourses have real effects and are produced in the context of legitimating principles, as it is these particular truth-claims that most readily address the discursive process, which is the core issue of the question.

5.3.1 Discourses are more than just language and have real effects.

The contention in the literature that discourse has real effects (cf. Zeeman et al. 2002; Jäger & Maier 2009) on which the research was premised, was borne out by the research findings. The clearest example of the constructive power of discourse was found in the INTO interviewee’s description of the impact Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) had on changing teacher attitudes to parents, as discussed in Section 4.2.4.1. An acceptance of the constructive power of discourse was apparent from the concern of Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009) with creating partnership type relationships, as noted in Section 4.4.2.1. That a ‘national public information campaign’ is given first priority in the list of actions to enable parental involvement in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011) also demonstrates that discourse has real effects on people’s behaviour. By influencing what is deemed feasible or unfeasible and what is appropriate or inappropriate, discourse strands impact on everyday parent-teacher interactions and parental involvement in education. Since various discourse sources are likely to be seen to have greater/lesser validity by different groups, their constructive impact varies. Hence, for example, the powerful position of the DES in the education system makes it likely that the discursive strands in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life have a strong constructive impact, although this does not deny the possibility of resistance. Similarly, teachers might be expected to be more receptive to the discourse...
strands of Possibilities for Partnership, produced as it is by their representative body. Since Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners addresses parents as well as practitioners, it is seeking to influence parent discourses directly.

The differing constructive capacity of discourse was apparent from the research findings; for instance, in the differences identified between parental involvement at national levels and at school levels in the education system. These differences were discussed at length by the NPC-P respondent and the Senior Inspector. The comments of the INTO and IPPN interviewees also revealed a different stance on national level involvement than on the involvement of parents at whole-school level. The tension between the dominance of traditional discourses at school level and stronger democratic discourses at national level results in a policy/practice gulf, where statements regarding parental involvement in national policy documents are not reflected in practices at school level (e.g. the highly trusting relationships that are envisaged in Mission, Vision and Values, Educate Together 2004, were problematised in the Educate Together respondent’s account of school realities, see Section 4.4.4.4). Initially this appears to challenge the notion that discourse is constructive by exposing the limitations of national level discourse in influencing school/teacher practice and vice versa.

If sustained, a challenge to the notion that discourse is constructive could be problematic, as it would undermine one of the fundamental principles of Foucauldian discourse theory. However, discourse theory itself offers an explanation for this apparent contradiction, through the notion of competing discourses existing within an overall Discourse (cf. Taylor 1997). The capitalisation in this understanding of ‘Discourse’ is crucial, as it relates to Gee’s (2011a) notion of ‘Big D’ Discourse. Gee’s concept allows for the inclusion of actions and interactions as well as language as part of the Discourse, as explained in Section 2.6.1.2. Therefore, the traditionally inspired practices of schools and teachers regarding parental involvement cannot be seen merely as outliers to the democratic or managerial discourses dominant at national levels, but are themselves part of the wider Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations. The discursive plane then is characterised by inter-discursivity and dissonance, with different levels of the system subject to various influences that are not constant through time. While the policy/practice gap highlights dissonance within the Discourse, there is also a notable congruence with regard to some discursive elements, such as the widespread acceptance that parental involvement is ‘good’, even if this translates into different forms of practice.

5.3.2 Legitimating principles of discourse enable and constrain what can be said and thought.

In order to better understand how the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations is constructed and constructive in Irish primary education, it is helpful here to consider the legitimating principles of that Discourse. While teacher professionalism as a legitimating principle has been discussed in detail in Chapter 4, other principles that bound the relationship between discourses of teacher professionalism and parent-teacher relations are relevant also. It is difficult to comprehensively
identify all the legitimating principles of any discourse, but the discussion of the research findings reveals that the following principles were important in determining the extent and limits of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish education: child centred education, parents as primary educators of their children, school autonomy, the existing structure of the education system, schools as part of their local communities and trust in the parent-teacher relationship.

5.3.2.1 Child-centred education

Irish primary education is based on a longstanding principle that education should provide for ‘the full and harmonious development of each child’ (DES 1971:13/1999:8). This requires ensuring that the child can ‘live a full life as a child’ and that every child is given ‘equal chance of obtaining optimum personal fulfilment’ (Government of Ireland 1971:12). As Section 4.4.1.2 demonstrates, the need to ensure that children’s interests are served by parental involvement in schools was a recurrent theme of the discourse sources analysed. This justification of parental involvement features, for example, in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009); Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010); Mission, Vision and values (Educate Together 2004); Primary School Curriculum Introduction (DES/NCCA 1999); Council Conclusions of 20 December 1996 on School Effectiveness: Principles and Strategies to Promote Success at School (Council of the European Union 1996); as well as in all the interviews. Child-centred primary education serves as a legitimating principle of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, therefore.

Such a principle is an important enabling factor for democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations, particularly at the level of parent and teacher discussing the individual child. Arguably, however, it may have a constraining effect on the whole-school level involvement of parents as Parent Association/Board of Management types of involvement are not easily reconciled with the notion of the holistic development of the individual child. The reticence of Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners, noted in Section 4.3.3.3, regarding whole-school involvement in comparison with the enthusiasm with which it advocated involvement in the education of individual children is relevant in this regard. The difficulty in justifying collective forms of involvement in educational terms may partially explain the greater caution expressed regarding whole-school forms of involvement by the INTO and IPPN respondents.

Concern for the holistic development of the child constrains traditional approaches to parents, as saying ‘no parents beyond this point’ is placed outside of the discursive limits by it. Indeed, such is the strength of this legitimating principle that even when traditionally inspired discursive strands were identified in documents or interview data, such as the distancing of parents implied in Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) and Supporting Each Other, the importance of parental involvement in the life of the child was not denied. This principle serves to place discourse strands that focus only on academic attainment to the detriment of the holistic development of the child outside the limits of the Discourse also. Hence, the managerial approach of How can we Make Schools Work Better? (World
Bank 2012) to parental involvement and attainment was not reflected in the Irish discourse sources analysed.

The principle of child-centred education, therefore, constrains both traditional and managerial influences in Irish education. While it can serve to enable democratic discourses of parental involvement, its effect is uneven, depending on whether the involvement is of an individual or whole-school form.

5.3.2.2 Parents as partners with schools

The Irish Constitutional provision that parents are the primary educators of their own children tends to be discussed in terms of how it was ignored in Irish education for much of the 20th century (cf. Hislop 2013). Nonetheless, it can be argued that this provision provides a legitimating principle for the discourse of parent-teacher relations, leading to the taken-for-granted assumption that parents are, or should be, ‘partners’ with schools. This was particularly apparent in Parents as Partners in Education (DES 1991). Arising from the role of parent as primary educator, the understanding that the education of the child is a matter of joint endeavour between the home and the school was a recurrent theme in much of the Irish documentation, as Section 4.4.1.1 discussed. It was a particularly apparent theme in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009), Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010) and Mission, Vision and Values (Educate Together 2004), as well as featuring in all the interviews. The parents’ rights agenda evident in Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe (EPA 2008) indicates that an understanding of the primary role of the parent is a legitimating principle in discourses originating outside of Ireland as well. While some of the interviewees, most notably the NPC-P respondent, questioned how partnership as a model for parent-teacher relations is defined, most of the documents just accepted it, thereby demonstrating how a challenge to that model is outside the discursive limits. Indeed, Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) was the only Irish document that contested the notion of partnership, and even then a critical reading was required to make the challenge identifiable.

It can be argued that the taken-for-granted nature of ‘parents as partners’ enables democratic discourses of parental involvement. The powerful interpellation (cf. Edley 2001, citing Althusser 1971) of this discourse strand can be seen particularly in the optimism that surrounds parent-practitioner relationships in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners and the way in which this positions parents and teachers. Given that parents and teachers generally want what is best for children, it is very difficult to resist this partnership discourse.

Alternatively, however, the understanding that parents are the primary educators of their children may make Irish teachers very conscious of the potential power of parents in schools. This may be a factor in teacher reluctance to cede power and influence to parents at whole-school levels, so enabling the continued existence of traditional discourses. Arguably also, the over-use of ‘partnership’ terminology has de-valued it as a concept, (cf. MacGiollaPhádraig 2005); therefore, its constructive
capacity may have waned since it is no longer a thought-provoking concept. The absence of a clear definition of partnership may cause teachers to be fearful of parental involvement, as the NPC-P respondent argued. This issue was widely discussed in the literature reviewed (Section 2.4.3.2). Paradoxically then the principle that there must be partnership between parents and teachers may actually constrain democratic discourses and enable traditional ones.

Based on the research findings it can be contended that the legitimating principle of the primary role of the parent constrains the emergence of managerial discourses. A strict mandating of parental involvement in terms of time and attendance in schools, such as characteristic of some American states (cf. Nakawaga 2000, also discussed by the Senior Inspector) was not found in any of the Irish documentation examined. In Ireland parents’ freedom of choice and the value of their home-based involvement is recognised, as is evident, for example, in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners. The assumption that parents can make choices about their children’s education as they are the primary educators of the child may also partially explain why school choice at primary level (in most parts of Ireland at least) has not become as contentious an issue as it has in other countries (cf. Buchanan & Fox 2008).

From an alternative perspective, however, this absence of directive may enable the continuation of traditional approaches to parents. Since parents’ responsibilities with regard to school and educational involvement are generally not clearly stated, this may have allowed parents to be excluded or to exclude themselves from schools, a point raised by the Senior Inspector. As was also found in the literature reviewed (cf. Sykes 2001), the tension between allowing parents freedom of choice and acknowledging their diversity, and yet defining expectations of their involvement, requires careful balance if it is to avoid managerial undertones while encouraging greater involvement in a democratic sense. Indeed, achieving this balance features among the most significant challenges of parent-teacher relations.

While the principle that parents are the primary educators of their children enables democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations it can also serve to enable traditional discourses, but it appears to have a role in constraining managerial influences in Irish education, although this is not clear-cut.

5.3.2.3 The (relative) autonomy of each school

A complicating factor regarding the involvement of parents at school level in Ireland is the relative autonomy enjoyed by each school. This frames the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in particular ways, as well as allowing a multitude of practices to exist at school level. Since these practices are themselves discursive, a cycle whereby practice affirms practice may develop within schools, weakening the potential for change. External discourses can find it difficult to infiltrate the insular nature of the school context. For instance, although the present research did not survey practicing teachers, the NPC-P respondent noted how some policy documents have a very limited readership. It is plausible, therefore, to apply Ball’s (1994a:17) point about teachers not reading
original policy documents to Ireland. That many Irish policy documents are no longer produced in hard copy but rather have to be downloaded further reduces the chances of them being widely read. If teachers do not read the documents produced, this widens the gap between the policy and practice contexts further. It also grants significant power to whoever is tasked with providing the interpretation of policy that is received at school level. This demonstrates the importance of power over discourse (at micro in addition to macro levels) as well as power in discourse, in accordance with Foucault’s (1980:93) understanding of the ‘manifold relations of power’ that exist in society.

Along with the above point, school autonomy means that many aspects of parental involvement cannot be mandated from above, even if that were desirable. There is evidence in the data that schools have considerable capacity to resist even those which are mandated; e.g. the NPC-P respondent’s discussion of parent members of Boards of Management being denied their legally protected role (see Section 4.2.4.3). The limited ability of policy-makers to insist on certain practices towards parents in schools highlights the importance of discourse in convincing parents and teachers at school level of the merits of parental involvement. The relatively large number of primary schools in the system and their discrete nature hinders this discursive work for practical reasons as well. For example, the Education Consultant noted how arguments for parental involvement have to be made on a school by school basis, with convincing each principal of its merits an important challenge for Parents’ Associations. School autonomy then can be regarded as a constraint on top-down discourses, (mostly managerial and democratic ones), enabling the traditional discourses with which teachers are most comfortable and familiar.

Related to this, Irish teachers enjoy high levels of autonomy both in terms of their classroom work and in decision-making at school level, in comparison with their international counterparts. This may constrain the development of greater parental involvement, as parents are seen as a threat to this autonomy, particularly when parental involvement is understood in the managerial sense. The notion of teachers feeling threatened by parental empowerment which was a feature of the international literature reviewed (cf. inter alia Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyshiv 2008), was confirmed as being relevant to Ireland also, by the comments of the INTO and NPC-P respondents as well as those of the Senior Inspector. The absence of collaborative cultures that has been identified in the literature as a historical feature of Irish schools (cf. Conway et al. 2009) seems likely to constrain democratic approaches to parents although, interestingly, this was not addressed by any of the elite informants. Perhaps it is becoming less applicable to schools as initiatives such as team teaching are introduced. In any event teacher autonomy can be seen as a constraint on the top-down discourses that argue for greater parental involvement in schools.

The complex nature of discourse work is, however, demonstrated by the possibility, notwithstanding the above points, that teacher and school autonomy might actually enable democratic discourses of parental involvement. For instance, parents have had a legally defined role in the management of schools since 1975 which would appear to position Irish schools well in terms of their
capacity to involve parents democratically. Indeed, the longstanding nature of parent involvement in school management may be among the reasons why parental involvement in Irish education is envied by parents’ groups in other European countries, (opinions of other parent groups discussed by NPC-P respondent) albeit the shortcomings of such involvement were addressed by the IPPN and NPC-P respondents as well. Similarly, while teacher autonomy permits teachers to resist top-down discourses, it also permits them to resist the bottom-up traditional discourses. Interested individuals, therefore, have the capacity to engage with parents in more meaningful ways, and to work to adjust their school cultures accordingly (cf. Hislop 2013).

School autonomy, then, can be seen to both enable and constrain traditional and democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations in Irish education.

5.3.2.4 Existing structures as legitimating principles

The Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish education is bounded to a large extent by the existing practices around parental involvement in schools. All of the Irish source documentation and interviews (with the possible exception of the NPC-P’s Partnership Schools Ireland initiative) assumed that parental involvement would continue to be addressed within the existing Board of Management and Parents’ Association arrangements. Parents as Partners in Education (DES 1991) provides a particularly good example of this assumption. The most radical propositions found in the discourse sources related to allowing parents to observe or help out in classrooms and were discussed by the Educate Together respondent. Indeed, the Educate Together interviewee discussed how sometimes founding parents are disappointed once Educate Together schools are established, because they are restricted in certain ways by the Rules for National Schools and, consequently, are different from what those parents had imagined they would be. In light of the taken-for-granted nature of existing structures, it can be argued that strands from traditional discourses continue to act as legitimating principles on the broader Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations.

Unsurprisingly this enables traditional discourses while constraining other forms of relationships, and is evidence of the past imped ing future development. As is obvious from the discussion of the Educate Together informant’s account in Section 4.4.4.4, even democratic approaches to parents have to exist within the framework provided by the traditional approaches. Since the management structure of schools has less impact on individual involvement than it has on whole-school involvement, this might partially explain why parental involvement at the level of the individual child has progressed more. The enthusiasm expressed in Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) for encouraging schools to organise reading initiatives involving parents, despite the rather traditional tenor of that document, provides a good example of this. That pedagogy has changed greatly in the past three decades, whereas the structure of the education system has not, may also explain the greater willingness of teachers to include parents individually in educational aspects of the school than collectively in governance aspects.
As would be expected, the legitimating principle of existing structures serves to enable traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations, thereby constraining democratic influences.

5.3.2.5 That schools must be part of their local communities
Across the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations it is assumed without qualification that schools must be a part of their local communities and that community aspects are crucial to primary schools. As described in Section 4.4.1.4, this was a particularly strong theme in the Irish documentation, but also featured in European documentation (e.g. Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe EPA 2008 and Involve Parents, Improve School EACEA 2009). All of the interviewees were satisfied to advocate links between schools and communities.

Since the principle that schools must be part of the local community does not fit with the notion that parents can be excluded from schools, it serves to constrain central aspects of traditional discourses. By positioning the school as an asset for its local community and as accessing the assets of the local community, democratic discourses are enabled. However, if the community aspect results in the understanding that local communities have a monitoring or evaluative role in ‘our’ school, this may enable managerial discourses of parent-teacher relations. The INTO respondent noted the consequences of competition for pupils between schools, and how principals strive to attract parents, which is relevant to this point. The possibility that local communities can be exclusionary in nature (cf. Bauch 2001) or that certain community members might have the capacity to exercise more power than others in the school raises the possibility that the link between the school and the community could constrain democratic discourses as well as enable them. While the notion that local communities might be exclusionary was not discussed by any of the interviewees, the INTO respondent discussed how certain parents, for example, those with a number of children in a school concerned about enrolments, can exert considerable power in the school.

Most obviously the understanding that schools are a part of their local communities enables democratic discourses of parent involvement, but it seems also to contain some potential to enable managerial discourses.

5.2.2.6 Trust as a legitimating principle
Trust, whether high or low, acts as a legitimating principle on discourses of parent-teacher relations, and could be identified as an underlying theme in many of the documentary and interview sources. That the levels of trust present affect the relationships between parents and teachers was strongly emphasised by the INTO interviewee, for example.

High trust serves to widen the discursive limits and as such enables more democratic forms of parental involvement to emerge (cf. inter alia Epstein 1995). High trust was a theme of the description of national level relationships provided by all of the interviewees, except the Educate Together respondent. All of the interviewees were ‘elite’ in terms of their position in their organisations and so their perceptions of high trust are perhaps unsurprising. Given, however, that the NPC-P respondent
herself discussed the constraints the NPC-P operate under, due to their limited budget and small staffing size, it is notable that her account positions the NPC-P as more able to influence the discourse at national level than would be expected. This may be highly significant in terms of understanding the discursive assumptions at play in Irish education, and so is discussed further in Section 6.3.2. By contrast, the Educate Together interviewee discussed the relationship between the DES and the school management bodies in terms of lower trust, although she did comment on instances where Educate Together have influenced policy, albeit their contribution is not always publicly acknowledged. Perceptions of trust vary then even at national levels.

Low trust was more apparent when school level relationships were discussed, and there was evidence of mutual distrust between teachers and parents in a collective sense, even if individual parent-teacher relationships were described as being trusting. A sense of low trust was strikingly prevalent in Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010), for example, while the Senior Inspector discussed principal/Parent Association relationships that were characterised by a lack of trust. Low trust enables traditional discourses by encouraging teachers to revert to the familiar, safe and more easily controlled forms of parental involvement. It also increases the likelihood of conflicting relationships, and conflict was a notable theme in many of the interviews (e.g. IPPN, Educate Together, Inspectorate informants). The greater prevalence of conflict as a theme in the interviews suggests that the discussion of conflict is outside of the discursive limits of documents concerned with presenting parental involvement in a positive light. Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009) is explicitly concerned with building trusting relationships between parents and teachers, for example, and no mention of conflict or difficult parent-practitioner relationships was found in it. Similarly, Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010) which is interested in improving relationships between Parent Associations and principals, minimises the possibility of conflict (‘misunderstandings’) although its concern with delineating boundaries for the Parent Association seems to assume low trust between parents and principals at school level.

High trust seems likely to enable democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations, while unsurprisingly low trust is more conductive to traditional and managerial approaches to parental involvement.

5.3.3 Construction of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations

In addressing the first research question (Do the discourses of parental involvement and teacher professionalism construct parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education?), through a Foucauldian approach to discourse, the research suggests that the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations is constructed by traditional, democratic and to a lesser extent (at least for now) managerial discourses of teacher professionalism. This construction occurs in the context of taken-for-granted assumptions about education and the education system in Ireland. The most notable of these assumptions include: the importance of child centred education, the position of parents as primary...
educators of their children, school autonomy, the existing structure of the education system, the positioning of schools as part of their local communities and the trust or mistrust that exists in the parent-teacher relationship. Since practice has a constructive role, it has to be considered as a part of the Discourse as well as being shaped by the Discourse. The complicated and sometimes contradictory ways in which these legitimating principles frame the Discourse were discussed above. The constructive capacity of each discursive strand differs depending on a variety of factors, including its compatibility with the legitimating principles, its relationship with other discourse strands, and the resistance or acceptance present at different levels of the education system, as well as varying across time and space.

The nature of discourse work means that researcher interpretations must always be considered incomplete and open to challenge (cf. Patterson 1997; Bucholtz 2001). Nonetheless, the above outlined understanding of how discourses of parental involvement and teacher professionalism construct parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education allows for the implications of such constructions for parent-teacher relations to be addressed. Hence, the second research question is explored below.

5.4 What implications do these constructions have for parent-teacher relations in Irish education?

The implications for parent-teacher relations of the above described Discourse of Parent-Teacher relations can most effectively be explored through examining how the Discourse produces and is produced by particular ‘truths’ and ‘norms’, and how power is exercised discursively, as understood by Foucauldian approaches to discourse (cf. Foucault 1980). It is these ‘truths’ and ‘norms’ that participants in the parent-teacher interaction interpret, negotiate and re-interpret in an ongoing process of discursive construction and re-construction. This capacity to construct and reconstruct demonstrates the power and agency of micro as well as the macro contexts. Identifying such aspects of the Discourse was a fundamental part of the present study, as it is through these aspects that the importance of discursive work in education and society generally can be understood.

5.4.1 ‘Truths’ constructed by discourse serve particular interests

The Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations contains many ‘truths’ of which the following are the most notable in terms of how they position the interests of parents, teachers and others in the Discourse: 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. These ‘truths’ serve the interests of different groups in different ways, as discussed below. ‘Truths’ are strengthened by the consensus that surrounds them in the Discourse.
While sometimes desirable, consensus can also be problematic, in that it makes it very difficult to propose alternative ‘truths’ that might serve the interests of others better (cf. Clarke 2012).

5.4.1.1 ‘Truth’ that parental involvement is ‘good’

One of the strongest ‘truths’ apparent in the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish primary education is that parental involvement is a ‘good thing’. Indeed, the use of the descriptor ‘good’ within the Discourse acts as an ‘essentialising tag’ (cf. Ball 1997a), limiting the capacity for nuanced debate. Even when people are wary about the implementation of greater parental involvement or even seek to restrain it, it is outside of the discursive limits for them to question its utility. All of the discursive sources analysed discussed the benefits of parental involvement in schools, particularly in relation to its benefits for children. When interviewees expressed caution regarding aspects of parental involvement generally they pre-faced any criticism by emphasising how parental involvement is useful and necessary in schools. Undoubtedly parental involvement in education is hugely advantageous and many research projects have demonstrated these advantages (cf. Desforges 2014). Nonetheless, the backgrounding of potential negative consequences of parental involvement was notable in many of the discourse sources, particularly in the documentation. For example, Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009) and Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010), both of which strongly advocated the advantages of parental involvement in education, made no mention of even the possibility of negative implications for children of such involvement. Of all the discourse sources examined, only the NPC-P respondent discussed the difficulties caused by parents putting too much pressure on their children to succeed at school. Arguably a rather simplistic understanding of the many factors that influence pupil learning accompanies the presentation of the discursive ‘truth’ that ‘children learn better when parents are involved’.

This ‘truth’ most obviously suits parents who are interested in involvement in schools as it provides them with an excellent rationale for that involvement. It fits with the natural instinct of parents to be interested in and supportive of their own child’s learning and success at school, as well as acknowledging the crucial role parents play in the life of a child. Accordingly, it was a ‘truth’ strongly apparent in the accounts of the NPC-P and Educate Together respondents, as Sections 4.4.2.3 and 4.4.4.4 show.

For teachers the ‘truth’ of the importance of parental involvement is attractive because it allows them to share culpability for educational failure with parents and removes some pressures from schools and teachers, as was apparent in Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997). It also provides an explanation for the relative success or failure of particular children in a class or school.

It can be argued with considerable justification that it suits policy-makers to emphasise the centrality of parental involvement in education as it focusses attention on aspects other than educational policy and resources. It allows blame for educational failure to be placed on parents, rather than the State or other organisations. Encouraging parental involvement as a policy initiative is a
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relatively cost effective way of achieving school improvements, as was noted in *Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies* (OECD Working Papers No 73, 2012). Parental involvement fits well within other discourses such as anti-poverty strategies, social justice, inclusion, etc., particularly when it takes a compensatory model form.

In many ways, since the importance of parental involvement cannot be disputed, this ‘truth’ has positive effects for pupils, teachers and learning. However, negative consequences can also be identified. It becomes problematic, for instance, if parental involvement is used as an excuse for educational failure or becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy with regard to children whose parents are not involved. That is, if teachers assume that children whose parents are not involved in their education will do less well in school, that assumption may hinder the progress of those children. As Nakagawa (2000) discussed, this ‘truth’ may serve to reinforce social disadvantage and exclusion if children whose parents are not involved in their education are doubly disadvantaged as a result. An over-emphasis on the benefits of parental involvement might serve to downplay the importance of schools and teachers and could be used as an excuse to cut resources for education. As considered in Section 5.3.2.1, focusing on educational benefits for individual children can serve to diminish the importance of collective and whole-school level parental involvement, which is a further possible negative consequence of over emphasising this ‘truth’.

Additionally, the notion that parental involvement is ‘good’ can also facilitate managerial discourses, as it is very difficult to argue against initiatives that have the support of the parent body, or which are presented as increasing parental involvement in schools (cf. Hanafin & Lynch 2002). Such is the strength of this ‘truth’ that parental involvement is good for children’s learning, that to question any aspect of parental involvement can be portrayed as questioning the importance of children’s learning which substantially reduces the chances of one’s argument being successful. If teachers’ concerns about parental involvement are not acknowledged and addressed the overwhelming sense that parental involvement itself is not a matter for debate may cause teachers to revert to traditional, ‘safe’ ways of engaging with parents.

5.4.1.2 ‘Truth’ that parental involvement was poor in the past but is much better now

Related to the ‘truth’ that parental involvement is a positive factor in education is the ‘truth’ that parents used to be excluded in the past, but are now much more included. This was a strong theme in the contributions of the elite informants, particularly those of the INTO and IPPN informants, and can also be inferred from *Mission, Vision and Values (Educate Together 2004)*. With regard to the national level involvement of parents, the NPC-P interviewee presented this as being greatly improved in recent years also.

This ‘truth’ is attractive to all the individuals and organisations that have been involved in Irish educational practice and policy-making over the past thirty years as it highlights their success in reforming the education system with regard to parents. Unsurprisingly then, all of the interviewees
were eager to discuss ways they/their organisation have contributed to improving parent-teacher relations. The ‘truth’ of improvement encourages a sense of momentum to be built up around the topic of parent-teacher relations, and affirming past success may be important in supporting future development. By attributing the past exclusion of parents to factors such as the role of the Catholic Church in education, teacher, parent and organisational culpability for such exclusion is reduced. The more negatively the past is portrayed, the greater the implied improvements are. This sense of great advancement also assists in positioning Ireland as a leader among parents’ groups in Europe (as the NPC-P respondent and Education Consultant described) with regard to its approach to parents. This is likely to enhance the prestige of the Irish primary education system and individuals within it to whom responsibility for that achievement is attributed.

The presentation of present day parental involvement in the best possible light is in many ways a benign discursive strategy. If, however, it leads to a complacent sense that parental involvement is ‘solved’, this may be harmful for parent-teacher relations, especially in light of comments from the NPC-P and IPPN respondents suggesting that parental involvement is still very unsatisfactory in some schools. The notion that the ‘problem’ of parental involvement is a historic one can serve to close down debate on the issue, making it difficult for parents to demand greater involvement in the face of a consensus of positivity. By focussing on improvements in individual level relationships and at national policy-making levels, this ‘truth’ can serve to conceal the wide variation in practices at school level. It may also allow a superficial treatment of parent-teacher relations, permitting, for instance, the symbolic involvement of parents to be regarded as meaningful involvement.

5.4.1.3 ‘Truth’ that parents need to be educated by schools/teachers

The centrality of parent education models to discourses of parental involvement were widely discussed in the literature reviewed (cf. inter alia Edwards & Warin 1999; Vincent & Tomlinson 1997). Although not ubiquitous across the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Ireland, Section 4.3.2.3 shows that the parent education model of involvement is a strong theme in it, particularly with regard to the individual level involvement of parents in their own children’s learning. The presence of this model was identified, for instance, in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009); in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011); in Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010); and in the Senior Inspector’s discussion of the efforts of DEIS schools to involve parents. This ‘truth’ positions teachers as educators of parents and prioritises the information and expertise of the teacher over that of the parent.

For a variety of reasons the ‘truth’ of the parent education model is attractive to teachers. It fits with longstanding constructions of parental involvement and can be reconciled with traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations. It does not challenge the position of teacher-as-expert and is closely aligned with his/her role as an educator. The detailed section on ‘teaching’ parents how to
support their children’s reading in *Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997) is relevant in this regard. Parent education is a form of ‘safe’ involvement and those parents who are its target are the least likely to challenge the school or to be interested in whole-school level or decision-making involvement, as the Senior Inspector noted. When it takes a compensatory model dimension, this ‘truth’ coincides with teachers’ moral values, allowing them to address issues of social inclusion and justice in their practices. That it is perceived to be in the best interests of children provides a powerful rationale for compensatory model approaches to parents. The ‘truth’ of the parent education model serves the interests of teachers, therefore.

Parent education models are attractive for parents also, in that they are related to parents’ core interests and concerns in the school, namely how best to help their own children. Attendance at talks and workshops is likely to be relatively undemanding and not unduly time-consuming for parents. The NPC-P and other organisations have built up substantial expertise in parent education and so can provide such education relatively easily. The priority given to parent education in *Education for Tomorrow* is notable in relation to this ‘truth’.

For policy-makers, the parent education model represents an efficient use of the resources, both physical and personal, of the school. It offers a cost-effective way to enhance pupil achievement and address concerns such as adult literacy and numeracy, as well as providing a way of targeting educational resources at those in most need of them. Since a lack of knowledge on the part of parents regarding how best to support their children is often posited as a reason for non-involvement, it provides a direct solution to this problem. The emphasis on providing information to parents in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* demonstrates the application of this ‘truth’.

Many positive results can be identified from the good intentions that usually underpin parent education and compensatory models. The ‘truth’ that parents need to be educated by schools can patronise parents, however, and is unlikely to provide a good foundation for relationships of genuine partnership, as was explained in the literature reviewed (cf. *inter alia* Borg & Mayo 2001). It serves to limit parental involvement to ways that do not challenge the status quo in schools, as well as implying that parental involvement is relevant only to certain parents. The understanding that some parents need education, whereas others do not, is not supportive of a cohesive parent body. Arguably some parent education initiatives favour managerial approaches to parent-teacher relations as they encourage the school to monitor parent behaviours, with parents who do not avail of the educational opportunities offered falling outside of the norms of the ‘good parent’. The sense from some of the ‘Learning Experiences’ in *Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners* that the learning of the parent as well as the child was monitored by the childcare setting is notable in light of this possibility.
5.4.1.4 ‘Truth’ that parents are not interested in whole-school policy or decision-making forms of involvement

The assumption that parents are not interested in or do not have the capacity for certain forms of school involvement (e.g. curricular issues, policy-making, governance) was identified in the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, most notably in teacher discourses. This was most clearly apparent in the INTO respondent’s contribution but was also present in the IPPN interviewee’s account, and in Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010). That parents are not ‘motivated’ regarding whole-school level involvement was a strongly presented ‘truth’ in Sixteen Quality Indicators (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture May 2000) as well. This ‘truth’ can be linked to another ‘truth’; that teachers need to maintain control of parental involvement. The need for teacher control of parental involvement was a theme in Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997).

These ‘truths’ reassure teachers who are concerned that parents wish to ‘take over’ in schools, and support the notion of the professional domain of the teacher, as both the INTO and IPPN respondents discussed. They reduce the chances of parental involvement altering the power balance in schools out of teachers’ favour. These understandings are likely to cause teachers to devote most attention to encouraging parental involvement at individual levels rather than at whole-school levels. These ‘truths’ also acknowledge the central role teachers have in motivating and co-ordinating parental involvement in schools.

Arguably many parents would not dispute the veracity of these ‘truths’, in that there was anecdotal evidence in the sources analysed of parents not being particularly interested in certain forms of school involvement, e.g. in the Senior Inspector’s account, as noted in Section 4.2.4.6. This issue was much discussed in the literature reviewed, including in Irish research such as that of Byrne & Smith (2010:147) and Hanafin & Lynch (2002:38). For those parents who are interested in school policy-making or meaningful collective involvement at whole-school level they are not ‘truths’ that serve their interests, however.

Since untrammelled parental involvement might be considered likely to disrupt the status quo of the education system (cf. Macfarlane 2008) it can be argued that the notion of teachers retaining a measure of control over parental involvement, despite all the rhetoric of partnership, actually suits policy-makers’ interests. The consideration of ways in which policy-makers might wish to limit parental involvement in Sixteen Quality Indicators is relevant in this regard. The professional qualifications of teachers and their presence in schools make it more likely that they will be aware of national policy requirements when making decisions at school level, than might the parent body. In some circumstances, however, where parent perspectives are nearer to policy-makers than those of teachers, the understanding that parents are not interested in curricular or policy decisions at school level is likely to frustrate policy-makers’ efforts at reform.
This ‘truth’ that parents are not/should not be concerned with certain aspects of the school is problematic if it serves to stymie meaningful parental involvement. By constructing certain aspects of the school as being outside the realm of the ‘good parent’ it is likely to discourage parents from seeking those sorts of involvement. This can result in collective parental involvement being confined to peripheral aspects of the school. The continued prevalence of fundraising forms of involvement in Irish education that was apparent from Possibilities for Partnership and the accounts of the NPC-P, IPPN and INTO informants indicates the applicability of this point to Irish schools.

Interestingly, the ‘truths’ that parents are not interested in involvement, and that their involvement should be controlled by teachers, do not apply to national policy-making involvement, where the capacity and interest of parent representative bodies is not questioned. Since there was much evidence provided by all the interviewees that parent representatives are involved at national levels, these ‘truths’ are not compatible with practice at national levels. Rather a contrary ‘truth’ is presented with regard to national level involvement; that parent representatives are actively involved and making a valuable contribution to policy-making. The enthusiasm and confidence with which all of the interviewees discussed this involvement was notable. The strength of this ‘truth’ demonstrates the success of the efforts the NPC-P have made to build and maintain relationships with the power holders at national level, most importantly the DES, as the NPC-P respondent discussed. It may also indicate the greater influence of democratic discourses at national level. The more limited sphere of national policy-making probably makes it easier for the NPC-P to access it, than does the multiple and autonomous contexts of individual schools, as the Education Consultant commented on. Many interviewees were able to list the contributions of individual NPC-P members to national level policy-making. This supports the point that there is a small network of people involved in Irish educational policy-making (cf. Drudy & Lynch 1993:76), and so the interpersonal relationships between these individuals are important. The ‘truth’ of the valuable contribution being made by parents at national level suits various groups in the educational sector because it allows them to present themselves as closely aligned with parent interests, as discussed in the next section. If, however, it leads to an assumption that parental involvement is ‘solved’ at school level because parents are involved at national levels, it is problematic, as that assumption would be likely to reduce the priority and attention given to parent-teacher relations.

5.4.1.5 ‘Truth’ of shared interests of parents/teachers or parents/policy-makers

The INTO and the IPPN informants emphasised how closely parents’ and teachers’ interests are aligned. Parallel to this, an interest in associating parental interests with those of the State was identified in parent and policy-makers’ discourses. Both the NPC-P respondent and the Senior Inspector discussed the close relationship between the NPC and the DES. The Education Consultant outlined how both the INTO and the DES regard the NPC-P as a potential ally. Given that all are ultimately interested in the education of children, shared interests among parents, teachers and
management are not disputed but, nonetheless, the way in which these shared interests are presented as discursive ‘truths’ is notable. These ‘truths’ are most easily identified with regard to national policy-making and the relationships between the various organisations at national level.

Teachers’ concern with emphasising the closeness of their priorities and those of parents is rooted in the discursive ‘truth’ that parental involvement is a good thing. It helps teachers’ arguments if they are seen to have the support of parents, and allows them to present themselves as fundamentally interested in the educational success of children rather than their own pay and conditions. The notion that parents and teachers want the same things also serves to weaken the contention that parental involvement remains a problematic issue in Irish education, which suits teachers who may wish to maintain the status quo. The comparison made by the IPPN informant between the INTO and the IPPN sought to position the IPPN agenda as being closer to that of parents than the INTO agenda. The co-authorship of *Supporting Each Other* by the IPPN and NPC-P and the IPPN’s involvement with the NPC-P in the *Partnership Schools Ireland* initiative demonstrates the work done recently by the IPPN in seeking to build relationships with parents at national level. This positioning by the IPPN indicates that being allied with parents is understood to be important, and as such points to the power of parents in national policy-making. Interestingly, although the INTO interviewee did seek to position parents’ and teachers’ interests as similar, a more cautious relationship between the NPC-P and INTO could be detected, from the contributions of both the INTO and NPC-P respondents, perhaps indicative of the influence of traditional discourses, even on national level relationships.

Generally much less attention to emphasising commonalities between parents and teachers was found in parent discourses, although some references to shared interests were found and the close relationship between the IPPN and the NPC-P was acknowledged by the NPC-P interviewee. However, it was the ‘truth’ of the closeness between NPC-P and DES objectives that were highlighted and examples of the good relationship between them provided. That the NPC-P work to maintain this relationship with the Department was evident from the NPC-P interviewee’s comments. Positioning themselves as a powerful and successful lobby group is likely to further the aims of parent representatives and so this ‘truth’ suits their purposes.

The discursive truth that parental involvement is advantageous in education provides policy-makers with a strong incentive to ensure that they are seen as working on behalf of and in conjunction with parents as, for example, the INTO interviewee discussed. Hence, the ‘truth’ of close relationships and alliances between parent representatives and policy-making bodies at national level is likely to be attractive to them. Since it is very difficult for teachers or others to challenge policies that are presented as being the will of parents (cf. Hanafin & Lynch 2002), the alignment of parents’ and policy-makers’ aims also provides a counter balance to the strength of teacher unions at national policy-making level and so is useful from DES perspectives. The numerical force of parents makes them an important constituency for political policy-makers.
Negotiation, compromise and alliance-making are crucial parts of policy-making. However, arguably there is a risk that if the ‘truth’ of certain alliances becomes embedded, then the desire to maintain them may override educationally sound principles. Given the relative weakness of the NPC-P in terms of funding in comparison with the other groups involved in educational policy-making, it can perhaps be argued that they are most vulnerable to having their agenda compromised by the need to maintain those good relationships that have been so crucial to their success in the first instance (cf. Hislop 2013). The potential for parents to be ‘used’ by more powerful groups also exists. Indeed, as discussed in Section 4.2.4.4, the Education Consultant provided a number of examples where the NPC-P was ‘used’ in the past, although not always to its detriment. Although the above points address national level relationships, the point also applies to school level involvement, where parents may feel the need to agree with school management in order to maintain their access to school involvement or to maintain relationships with teachers. This point is returned to in Section 6.5.2, given its importance when the achievement of managerial objectives in education is being considered.

5.4.2 Discourse provides sets of norms that have disciplinary effects

The legitimating principles and truths of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations produce norms that allow the behaviour of people to be regulated, ranked and monitored, and which people internalise so as to define and evaluate their own behaviour (cf. Foucault 1980). Given the autonomous nature of the Irish primary system, the internal discipline of normalising judgments is particularly relevant. Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009), and Supporting Each Other (NPC-P & IPPN 2010), provide clear examples of documents that have normative properties, although all of the documents analysed can be seen as endeavouring to guide people’s behaviour in particular ways. Of most relevance to the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations is how parents and teachers are disciplined by these discursively produced understandings of what is appropriate and acceptable.

5.3.2.1 Norms regarding the ‘good parent’

Given the variation in practices at school level, and the ultimate importance of interpersonal dynamics in parent-teacher relations, it is difficult to generalise regarding the norm of the ‘good parent’ in Irish education. Nonetheless, the description provided of the traditional model of the ‘good parent’ in Section 2.2, based on the literature reviewed, seems in many respects to be similar to the set of norms provided by the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish primary education for the ‘good parent’, especially at school level.

It can be argued that with regard to involvement in the education of his/her own children, in general the ‘good parent’ is expected to demonstrate their interest in the child’s educational progress, engage in educational activities with the child at home, come to the school when invited, heed the advice of the teacher and work to build a friendly relationship with that teacher. This is to be
accomplished, however, without interfering with the professional domain of the teacher and care is to be taken not to be ‘telling’ the teacher how to teach, as was evident, for example, from the INTO informant’s account. In light of the huge variations in practice between teachers and schools, these norms are likely to differ greatly depending on the particular culture of a school (or, indeed, approach of a teacher) and the parent must, therefore, read the climate of the school and decipher what is regarded as the norm in that context.

With regard to collective involvement it would appear from the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations that involvement at whole-school levels is not a pre-requisite for being regarded as a ‘good parent’. If the parent does get involved at this level, he/she should be aware that certain aspects of the school may be regarded as part of teachers’ domains and unsuited to parental involvement. Despite all the commentary on how collective parental involvement needs to go beyond fundraising, the accounts of the IPPN, INTO and NPC-P interviewees suggest that it is the norm for the parent active at whole-school level to be involved in fundraising initiatives or attending parent education events. Meaningful involvement in school decision-making is likely to be outside the norm in many schools, although parents may be consulted on certain policies that are deemed relevant to parents as was, for instance, outlined in Supporting Each Other. The Senior Inspector’s and NPC-P interviewee’s contributions indicate that such consultation often takes the form of being asked to comment on policies that have already been formulated by the school staff. Agreement or suggestions for minor changes tends to be what is expected of the ‘good parent’ in these instances, with arguments for whole scale revisions unlikely to be welcomed. The massive variation between school contexts demands that the parent read the norms for his/her own school so as to remain within the ‘good parent’ classification.

Interestingly, norms based on parental characteristics seem to be less of an issue in Ireland than would be expected from reviewing the international literature. An overtly differentiated positioning of parents depending on their social class, ethnicity or gender was not found on a widespread basis in the Irish Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations. Rather it appears to be the autonomy of schools and teachers that allows for different sets of norms to be applied to parental involvement. Notwithstanding this point, the presence of the parent education model in the Discourse suggests some differential positioning of parents, even if this is not directly stated in class-based terms. The possibility that Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners is directed more at parents accessing community childcare facilities was noted in Section 4.3.2.3, for instance. Similarly, the Senior Inspector and Education Consultant commented on the particular efforts of DEIS schools to involve parents. That parental involvement is more of a norm in DEIS than other schools suggests a degree of a class-based approach to the issue, and is likely to be related to compensatory models of parental involvement, given that involving parents has long been part of the strategy to tackle educational disadvantage. That the parent education model associated with such forms of involvement make it a type of ‘safe’ involvement for teachers is likely to increase the ease with which
such involvement is accepted as the norm in DEIS schools and, indeed, the Senior Inspector directly addressed this likelihood.

School choice is a strong component of parental involvement discourses internationally, as was discussed in Section 2.3.3.6. This positioning of the ‘good parent’ as ‘consumer’ was not a strong feature in the Irish documentation, and so parental involvement is not normalised in school choice terms. Section 4.3.2.4, however, noted the assumption of a market model of schooling in Statement for Strategy (DES 2011) and the related Programme for Government, which raises the possibility that a consumer orientation may become a norm of the ‘good parent’ in the future.

At national level, the limited number of parents involved at that level do not seem subject to the norms of school level involvement. Their involvement in educational decision-making, lobbying and policy-making is widely accepted across the Discourse and was mentioned by all of the elite informants, even if the Educate Together interviewee was sceptical about the consultative nature of the DES. Arguably the intervention of the DES to establish and support the NPC-P (e.g. through the publication of Parents as Partners in Education) and the close relationship built up between the NPC-P and the DES has helped widen the norms of parental involvement at this level. Perhaps these norms would narrow should there be serious disagreement between parent representatives and more powerful groupings. At present, however, there is great disparity between the norms of parental involvement at school when compared to national levels, as was particularly apparent in the account of the NPC-P respondent.

5.3.2.2 Norms regarding the ‘good teacher’

Again, the wide variation in practices at school level make it difficult to generalise about the set of norms for the ‘good’ teacher provided by the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations. In many instances, however, these revolve around a combination of acknowledging the importance of parent involvement while at the same time seeking to protect traditional notions of teacher professionalism by maintaining control of parental involvement.

It can be contended that the norms dictate that the ‘good’ teacher is generous in his/her approach to parents, and is willing to engage with them regarding the education of the individual child. This notion of generosity implies that engagement with parents is not a core function of the teacher, but one that ‘good’ teachers fulfil. While teachers are expected to listen to and be responsive to parent concerns about the children, they tend to be positioned as authoritative advisors of parents as, for instance, in Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997). Norms of engagement with parents differ between schools and school patronage bodies, and so like the parent the teacher must read the culture of the school to discern its norms. Arguably this process of ‘reading’ is considerably easier for teachers than it is for parents, however; hence, teachers are likely to find it easier to exercise power in the context of the school than are parents.
Too much enthusiasm for collective parental involvement at whole-school level is likely to be outside of the norms of teacher discourses of parent-teacher relations, as the restraint of *Possibilities for Partnership* suggested. It is caution and an understanding that certain aspects of the school are most appropriate for parental involvement that is expected of the ‘good’ teacher. Although the ‘good’ teacher talks about how parental involvement needs to move beyond fundraising, fundraising is likely to be seen as a form of ‘safe’ involvement for which gratitude can readily be expressed. Again of course the particular circumstances of the school dictate the precise set of norms that guide teacher behaviour, and in some instances the norms would be much wider than outlined here.

Teachers and teacher representatives involved in national level policy-making appear to have more freedom to express enthusiasm and appreciation for the involvement of parents as equal partners at that level as the INTO interviewee’s account indicates. The comments of the INTO and NPC-P respondents about each other’s organisations suggests that working together to achieve shared objectives is the norm, even if tensions remain in the parent-teacher relationship at national levels. In addressing their teaching colleagues, however, those involved in national level policy-making and negotiation have to be careful to recognise teacher fears and so to temper their remarks accordingly, as the INTO respondent explained and *Possibilities for Partnership* demonstrates.

### 5.4.3 The exercise of power in the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations

The Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations provides a good example of how power circulates at all levels of the discourse. This understanding of individuals as a source and vehicle of power (cf. Foucault 1980) has important implications for parent-teacher relations in Irish primary education. It permits individual agency and a two-way relationship between bottom-up and top-down discourses. It also has implications with regard the position of the State in the discursive process and allows for positive as well as negative consequences of the exercise of power.

#### 5.4.3.1 Individuals as vehicles of power

All of the elite informants made reference to the great variation in practices of parental involvement at school level. This reveals how power in the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations ultimately rests with the individuals involved in each parent-teacher interaction. Regardless of the legitimating principles, truths and norms of the Discourse, if for whatever reason an individual parent or teacher chooses not to engage with the other, it is impossible for that interaction to be forced. As well as demonstrating the powerfulness of everyone, this also demonstrates the powerlessness of everyone, as they cannot force others to behave in certain ways in the parent-teacher relationship. This understanding was particularly clear in the Educate Together respondent’s account, as outlined in *Section 4.4.4.4*.

In light of the constructive effects of discourse, that discourses are promulgated, interpreted and resisted by individuals is a further source of power for individual parents and teachers. While some people are located such that they can more effectively circulate and influence discourse than
others (for example, the elite interviewees), all individuals have a role in discourse production and transmission through their actions and language.

Teachers are subject to school and professional norms as well as discursive disciplinary technologies but arguably parents are only subject to discursive norms. While then teachers are supported by professional and institutional sources of power these can also constrain their own exercise of power, as the Educate Together informant explained. Parents may appear relatively powerless in the parent-teacher interaction but that they are less susceptible to sanction provides them with a source of power also, which was mentioned by the IPPN interviewee. Arguably this awareness of the difficulty in controlling parental behaviour partially explains the identified teacher reluctance regarding parental involvement in schools.

5.4.3.2 Power of bottom-up discourses and top-down discourses

That each individual parent and teacher has the capacity to exercise agency, even in the context of the dominant elements of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, explains the discursive re-interpretation and resistance of democratic discourses at school level that was evident from the data. The presence of traditional strands in the Discourse of Parent-Teacher relations can be attributed to the power of bottom-up discourses to influence the overall Discourse. These bottom-up discourses mainly comprise teacher discourses and practices at school level, although it can be contended that the discursive disciplining of parents at school level means that traditional strands are present in parent discourses at this level also, as were, for instance, identified in Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010).

While bottom-up discourses influence the overall Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, the dominance of democratic discourses at national level demonstrate the potential of top-down discourses to resist and re-interpret as well. This is particularly evident with regard to discourse from organisations such as the INTO where the position of the national body on the need for parent-teacher partnership differs quite markedly from that of their school level membership. That democratic discourse strands are also apparent at school level reveals the power of top-down discourses to influence the overall Discourse.
Diagram 1 represents the influence of various discourses on the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations. Traditional and democratic influences on the Discourse were most easily identified from the analysis of the research findings. Given the way in which managerialism appropriates the terminology of democracy (cf. Locke et al. 2005; Bauch 2001) its influence is difficult to clearly identify. As argued in Section 4.7 there is not a readily accessible space in Irish education for managerial discourses, and managerial approaches are not yet dominant. However, managerial discourse strands were identified in Discourses of Parent-Teacher Relations originating outside of Ireland (most notably How can we Make Schools Work Better World Bank 2012; and Schools for the 21st Century Commission of the European Communities 2007) as well as in DES documentation (most strongly in the Programme for Government attached to the DES Statement of Strategy DES 2011; and Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life DES 2011; also Parents as Partners in Education DES 1991). It is plausible to argue, therefore, that some of the seemingly democratic top-down discourses contain managerial assumptions about the role of parents in schools (hence the medium pink overlay on the diagram) even if these are not as strong as in other countries. The covert nature of the parent education model in Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009), the emphasis on school accountability in Education for Tomorrow and the requirement that schools report their adherence to Department policies to parents (Circular 08/11; Circular 65/11; Circular 45/13, etc.) provide examples of managerial infiltration. There is significant resistance to managerial approaches in the Discourse, (as expressed, for example, in Possibilities for Partnership, and by the INTO, Educate Together informants and the Education Consultant), and this resistance seems strongest at school level. Nonetheless, the potential influence of managerialism, even at school level cannot be ignored (hence the pale pink overlay on the diagram). This influence is further discussed in Section 6.3.
5.4.3.3 Power of the State/DES

Foucault’s notion of power, as discussed in Section 2.6.1.6, is especially interesting when examining the role of the State in any policy area. The foundation of the NPC-P by the Minister for Education and the on-going inclusion and influence of the NPC-P in national level policy-making demonstrates the power of the DES to shape the national policy-making field with regard to parental involvement. The Educate Together official’s account of educational policy-making suggests that the top-down influence of the DES is becoming more important in Irish education, although this was contradicted by the Education Consultant. As outlined above, it is difficult to precisely identify whether DES interest in including parents (specifically the NPC-P given Educate Together’s different experience) is inspired by democratic or managerial discourses, as it is in the interests of the State to present its motivation as democratic in nature, but the attractiveness of managerial discourses for policy-makers at this level means managerial motivations are also likely to be relevant (cf. Ball 2003). This point is returned to in Section 6.3. In any event, the DES exercises significant power in terms of national policy-making, and has used this power to ensure the inclusion of parents, through the NPC-P, at national levels.

That the inclusion of parents at national levels is not reflected at school level demonstrates the limitations of DES power and the corresponding power of the smaller units. Recent initiatives (e.g. surveying parents about school uniforms and the proposed Parents’ Charter) show a new willingness at DES level to push the issue of parental involvement at school level. It is too early to judge the success of these attempts yet, although that not all schools followed the directive on the uniform survey is notable (Quinn 2014), despite its unequivocally mandated nature. It seems likely that the DES only has the capacity to focus on a limited number of policy areas at any one time, and arguably parental involvement at school level has been seen as a policy lever (such as in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life or the school patronage issue) rather than as a policy priority in its own right up to this. Possible implications of this policy lever approach are discussed in Section 6.3.

5.4.3.4 Positive and negative effects of power

The exercise of power at various levels of the education system by various organisations and individuals with regard to parent-teacher relations has many positive effects, as well as the more negative connotations that often accompany discussions of power.

The benefits of the insights and experience that parent representatives bring to national policy discussions was commented on by a number of the interviewees, particularly the Education Consultant and the IPPN informant. That the NPC-P makes great efforts to base its contributions on research evidence can be seen to further enhance its role. Where parents have meaningful roles at whole-school level there is great potential for this to be as insightful and useful as at national levels. The value of parental involvement in the education of their own children is generally not disputed in the literature, and as noted in Section 5.4.1.1 is a point of wide consensus in the Discourse. That the exercise of
power by parents can have negative effects for teachers (as, for instance, elaborated by the Educate Together informant), or for their own children (the NPC-P respondent being the only informant who mentioned this) does, however, indicate that negative implications of parents’ exercise of power also have to be considered.

The exercise of power as a normative activity by teachers’ representatives at national level by accepting and facilitating the involvement of parents in decision-making is likely to have positive consequences for Irish education generally. At school level, since the exercise of power by teachers has tended to involve the limiting of parental involvement, the results may not be as positive, although the maintenance of focus of teachers on their core teaching role can be viewed positively. That this exercise of power might serve to resist managerial discourses is also positive. At individual level by being open to and inclusive of parents it is likely that many teachers have further contributed to the educational success of their pupils. Teacher resistance to parental involvement demonstrates a negative use of power, however.

By promulgating democratic discourses of parental involvement, even with varied success, the many organisations that contribute to the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Ireland can be understood as having a positive impact. Given the importance of co-ordination and management of the education system, the DES role can, similarly, be viewed positively, even if the managerial elements that can be identified in some of its approaches cause its contribution to be regarded more cautiously. It seems likely that parental involvement would not have advanced as far as it has in Ireland were it not for the foundation of the NPC-P in 1985, and given the different experiences of parents in other European countries even at the present time as the NPC-P interviewee and Education Consultant described, credit must go to the DES for that incidence of exercising power.

5.4.4 Implications of the constructions for parent-teacher relations in Irish education; discourse as complex, entangled, in a state of flux

In examining the second research question (What implications do constructions have of parental involvement have for parent-teacher relations in Irish education?) from a Foucauldian perspective, the research suggests that the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations can be understood as a series of ‘truths’ that serve or hinder the interests of parents, teachers and policy-makers in various ways. The most significant of these ‘truths’ include: 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. The legitimating principles and truths provide a set of norms that discipline the behaviour of teachers and parents, and so influence how parent-teacher relations are approached, understood and discussed. Power relations in the Discourse allow interplay between bottom-up and top-down discourses; therefore, the Discourse is characterised by inter-discursivity between traditional and democratic discourses, underpinned by
increasingly managerial assumptions. Arising from the examination of these truths, norms and power relations, the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish education can be described (albeit with the usual caveat that this is but one possible description) as recognising the value of parental involvement in the education of the individual child and in national level policy-making, but yet demanding that parental involvement is treated with caution and vigilance by teachers to ensure it does not interfere with their professional status and role.

Policy ideas in good currency at any particular time affect the relative strength of various discourse strands; for instance, the international concern with parental involvement in school choice terms and as an instrument for raising attainment is influential in Statement of Strategy/ Programme for Government (DES 2011) and Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (DES 2011) respectively. Also certain discourse strands are likely to appeal more to certain levels or certain groups within the education system. Therefore, teacher interpretations of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations differ from parent interpretations, as the differences in the NPC-P and INTO interviewee’s accounts demonstrated. Furthermore, Foucault’s notion of heterotopia (cf. Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992:149) explains how discourses may be perceived and interpreted in different ways even by the one person or organisation. The striking variation between Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010) and the interview with the NPC-P respondent is an example of this. Since parental involvement has tended to have a relatively low profile as a policy-area in Irish education, discursive positions have not yet stabilised. If people have not had to debate and defend issues relating to parental involvement they may not be fully conscious of their own perspectives on it. Hence, the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations is complicated, multi-faceted and changeable.

It can be strongly contended that the tensions between traditional and democratic discourses, along with the concerns raised by the ‘slouching beast’ of managerialism (Ball 2013), have not helped the cause of parental involvement at school level in Irish primary education. The confusion and complexity of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations is likely to cause teachers to revert to the familiarity of traditional approaches to parents as, indeed, the NPC-P respondent noted, albeit she did not use discursive terms. Arguably then there is much discursive work to be done if meaningful parental involvement is to be achieved on a widespread basis in Irish primary schools. Some potential ways through which this work might be undertaken are outlined in the next section, as the third research question is explored.

5.5 How can these constructions be challenged and/or supported to enhance parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish primary education?

As Wodak (1999) noted, it is not adequate in critical approaches to discourse analysis to merely analyse the discourse, but rather some attempt needs to be made to apply the results of the analysis in practical terms. Indeed a concern with such application is a core principle of DHA orientated work. Having considered somewhat abstract aspects of discourse in the first two research
questions, the third question, therefore, provides an opportunity to examine the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in the context of lived realities. This allows adequate attention be paid to micro- as well as macro-levels in the analysis, as Foucault emphasised (cf. Popkewitz & Brennan 1998).

In considering this third research question, the subjective nature of, and the effects of researcher positionality in, discourse work are particularly apparent. The requirement of DHA that the analyst’s stance be transparent (cf. Reisigl & Wodak 2009:88) is acknowledged in the researcher’s recognition that she has been ‘interpellated’ (cf. Edley 2001) by democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. Therefore, she is of the opinion that there is a need to advance genuinely democratic constructions in Irish primary education. Conversely, she is repelled by managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations and the assumptions about teacher professionalism within them; this issue is returned to in the final chapter. Hence, the discussion below proceeds on the understanding that it is worthwhile to explore how the greater legitimisation of democratic discourses might be achieved. This positioning does not deny that another researcher, with access to a different interpretative repertoire, might come to a different conclusion. Indeed, given the prevalence of traditional constructions at school level that were identified during the research, it is reasonable to argue that many teachers might find the promotion of traditional discourses regarding parents more palatable. Likewise, the influence of managerial discourses internationally suggests that these constructions are attractive to many people, particularly policy-makers for whom the ‘top-down’ nature of managerialism offers benefits. In any event, however, the researcher’s particular identity and position at the present time cause her to regard the promotion of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations as the most satisfactory course of action.

In order to explore how discursive constructions might be challenged or supported to the advantage of democratic parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish schools, it is important here to consider the strategies through which discourses are legitimised. Ways through which these processes of legitimisation might be utilised for democratic purposes can then be discussed. The Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations is explored below through the application of relevant aspects of Van Leeuwen’s (2007) model of discursive legitimation, examining how authorisation, moral evaluation and mythopoesis legitimise the Discourse. The legitimising qualities of inter-discursivity and recontextualisation are also considered, as these are perhaps not fully addressed in Van Leeuwen’s model. It is acknowledged that some of these legitimation strategies resemble or are closely associated with the legitimating principles, norms and truths of Foucauldian discourse discussed above. This demonstrates the artificiality of trying to separate out processes of discursive legitimation and reification from processes of discursive construction and practice. These close relationships do, however, demonstrate the self-perpetuating and entangled nature of discourse. Moreover, it is necessary to examine legitimation strategies specifically if we are to gain insight into how democratic discourses might be legitimised so as to become reified and dominant in Irish education.
5.5.1 Authorisation
The Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations relies on personal and impersonal forms of authorisation to support and sustain it. Of the forms of authorisation listed by Van Leeuwen (2007:94) it is expert authority, the authority of tradition, and the authority of conformity that are most applicable to the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations as understood above.

5.5.1.1 Expert authority
As discussed in Section 5.4.1.1, the understanding that parental involvement is ‘good’, especially because of the benefits it brings to children, is in Foucauldian terms, a strong ‘regime of truth’ in the Discourse. It was clear from the discourse sources analysed that this ‘truth’ is compellingly legitimised by expert authority, with many references to how parental involvement is justified by research evidence noted in Chapter 4. For instance, references to research were mentioned in Education for Tomorrow (NPC-P 2010), Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997), and in the account of the Education Consultant, Senior Inspector, NCCA and NPC-P respondents. Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies (OECD 2012) reported directly on the consequences of parental involvement on student attainment. As noted in Section 4.4.1.2 with regard to Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009), research-based justifications can also be inferred in documents even when not directly stated. The concern with expert authorisation was particularly apparent in the NPC-P interviewee’s account of NPC-P efforts to ensure that their policy positions are supported by research evidence and expert opinion, as outlined in Section 4.9.3. It was notable also that despite her own ‘expert’ status, the NCCA interviewee chose to structure her responses during the interview with reference to various research reports and reviews, thereby emphasising the weight attached to expert authorisation. While some of the documents and interviewees made specific reference to particular reports (e.g. many researchers cited in Possibilities for Partnership), most just referred to research evidence in a generic sense. That specific references were not deemed necessary serves to imply that ‘all’ research evidence supports the validity of parental involvement in education.

So long as the ‘experts’ authorise democratic forms of parental involvement, there is a strong claim to be made that this discursive legitimation strategy is likely to support democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations, particularly with regard involvement in the education of the individual child. The widespread acceptance of the ‘truth’ that parental involvement is ‘good’ indicates the effects of this legitimation. Indeed, such is the essentialising nature of this understanding, that even if research evidence suggested a contrary perspective on parental involvement it seems likely it would not be accepted as legitimate. The presence of internationally renowned ‘experts’ at NPC-P national conferences (e.g. Joyce Epstein in 2013, Charles Desforges in 2014) allowed expert authorisation to reach a wider audience than just those who frequently access educational research, and demonstrates NPC-P’s awareness of this discursive strategy. However, given that much research focusses on the
direct contribution of parents to their children’s learning, rather than on the effects of whole-school forms of involvement and, indeed, that the effects for children of school-based forms of involvement are less clearly positive (cf. *inter alia* Harris & Goodall 2008; Desimone 1999) this discursive strategy is arguably not as useful in legitimising whole-school forms of involvement.

The issue of expert authorisation can also be considered with regard to the traditional understanding of the teacher-as-expert. That this remains a feature in the discourse sources analysed was discussed extensively in *Section 4.2.2.2*. ‘Teachers-as-experts’ are inclined to legitimise traditional approaches, especially at whole-school level, as the cautious tone of *Possibilities for Partnership* demonstrates. The power of expert authorisation as a legitimation strategy is such that those perceived as ‘experts’ can have considerable influence over the development of the discourse. Expert authorisation, when considered in the context of ‘teacher-as-expert’ then, can significantly challenge democratic discourses of parental involvement, particularly at the local level of the school where teachers’ expertise is most accepted. That teacher expertise does not carry as much weight at national levels may explain the greater prevalence of democratic approaches there. The discursive legitimation provided by the teacher-as-expert does not initially appear useful for promoting democratic discourses. However, given the power of expert authority, and the still widespread acceptance of the expertise of the teacher at local levels, if and when teachers come to embrace new ideas of democratic professionalism in which engagement with parents is central, then their capacity to pronounce expert authority should ensure that they are a significant asset for democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations. As seen in *Section 4.2*, the way in which teachers have managed to continue to legitimise traditional discourses even in the face of managerial and democratic challenges demonstrates their capacity to legitimise discourse.

The discursive acceptance of the ‘truth’ that parental involvement is ‘good’, described in *Section 5.4.1.1* may infer an ‘expertise’ on parents in terms of their knowledge of what is best for their children. Without denying the complementary knowledge of parents, and the acknowledgement of it that is crucial in democratic constructions, this can be problematic if parental expertise about educational matters is valued above the professional and pedagogical expertise of teachers. Since parent expertise is most easily understood in relation to their own children, it may legitimate discourses of individualism, discussed in *Section 2.3.3.6* and often associated with market models of school provision. Furthermore, the expert authorisation of parents may be used to legitimate State policy, through building alliances between parents and the State. This implication is addressed in *Section 6.3.2*.

### 5.5.1.2 Authority of tradition

The notion of the ‘authority of tradition’ links closely with the understanding that existing structures of the education system set the discursive limits of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations discussed in *Section 5.3.2.4*. As Van Leeuwen (2007:96) explained, this form of
authorisation is often less conscious than other forms. Indeed, there was some denial of it in the discourse sources analysed; for instance, in the INTO and IPPN interviewees’ description of the difference between parent-teacher relations in the past and at present outlined in Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2. Yet the continuing presence of traditional approaches to parental involvement, especially at whole-school level and in teacher discourses, suggests that tradition has a role in authorising the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations. The tendency, evident in the accounts of the NPC-P, INTO and IPPN respondent, of schools using parental involvement in fundraising as a proxy for ‘good’ parental involvement despite discursive acceptance that parental involvement should involve more meaningful activities demonstrates the authority of ‘this is what we have always done’ (Van Leeuwen 2007:96). Similarly, despite the concerns expressed by the IPPN interviewee and the Education Consultant about the Board of Management structure, its authority was unchallenged in the discourse sources analysed. The authority of tradition can be seen to have an opposite effect regarding national level parental involvement, where the acceptance of parents there can be at least partially explained by the tradition of involvement which has been established over the past thirty years.

In order to challenge the implicit authority of tradition, it is necessary to encourage teachers (and parents) to scrutinise ‘the unquestioned grammar of teaching’ (Hargreaves 2000:156). The identification and questioning of the way taken-for-granted assumptions about educational structures and processes constrain people’s behaviour in particular ways is very much in accordance with Foucauldian approaches to discourse (cf. Foucault 1980). Indeed, the technologies of critical discourse analysis itself, as discussed in Section 3.3, offers possibilities through which an ongoing process of reflection might be established. Initiatives such as the School Self-Evaluation Initiative (DES Inspectorate 2012), therefore, have potential in terms of encouraging this reflective process, as the INTO respondent noted, even if the possibility of managerial undertones in such initiatives must be recognised. Any initiative that cultivates a habit whereby longstanding customs and practices at school level are interrogated and assessed in meaningful ways is useful for questioning the authority of tradition. This process of questioning itself challenges the traditional discourses influential in the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations. The degree of resistance to managerial approaches identified in the Irish parent and teacher discourse sources offers hope that the space created by this challenge to traditionalism would not be colonised by managerialism, but rather would support the development of democratic approaches to parental involvement and, indeed, to education more broadly.

5.5.1.3 Authority of conformity

Although the disparity among schools regarding their practices towards parents was a recurrent feature in the interviews, particularly apparent in the IPPN, INTO and NPC-P respondents’ accounts, the ‘authority of conformity’ can be understood to play a role in authorising the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, particularly with regard to how that Discourse is interpreted within individual school communities. Van Leeuwen (2007:96, 97) explained this authorisation as based on
the understanding that ‘Everybody else is doing it, so should you’. This concept is clearly linked to Foucault’s notion of discursive norms, as discussed in Section 5.4.2. An example of this legitimating strategy was discussed in Section 4.4.2.1, regarding Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009), in which, as its title suggests, partnership between parents and practitioners is deliberately presented as something all participants should conform to throughout.

While the specific example of Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners involves an attempt to exercise the authority of conformity across the discursive plane, conformity as a legitimation strategy is probably most relevant within schools, where school culture plays an important role in dictating how parent-teacher relationships develop (cf. Hislop 2013). Krzyzanowski’s (2011:284 citing Abélès 2000:35) explanation of engrenage or ‘institutional immersion’ is useful when considering the authority of conformity on internal school discourses. The idea that individual agency is gradually lost as actors become part of institutional practices helps explain how a cycle whereby practice affirms practices develops within schools, and how external discourses can find it hard to penetrate the insular circuits of discourse that dominate within the school. As was discussed in Section 5.3.2.3 the autonomous nature of primary schools in Ireland contributes to the development of individual school discourses, often of a traditional nature, which are then legitimised through the authority of conformity. The challenge that the institutional weight of the school presents for parents was recognised in the literature reviewed (cf. Ball 1994a) but that this institutional weight can be equally heavy for teachers is not as much acknowledged. Arguably institutional pressures are most relevant when parental involvement is highly visible, for instance, at whole-school levels, and so this may explain the particular continuation of traditional forms of parent-teacher relations at this level. Less visible forms of parent-teacher interaction at the individual level may be less susceptible to the legitimating force of conformity, and so the agency of individual teachers at this level may result in democratic practices in some cases. This possibility explains the apparent disparity that was identified between and even within interviewee descriptions of parental involvement in Ireland. The ostensible contradictions within the IPPN respondent’s account, as discussed in Section 4.2.4.2, provides a good example of the difficulties of describing practices of parental involvement in a generalised and coherent way, due to the co-existence of individual agency and discursive conformity.

The creation of self-reflective and self-evaluative school communities and teachers, as discussed in Section 5.5.1.2 above, is likely to be important in allowing the authority of conformity to legitimise democratic rather than other discourses. Given the strength of traditional discourses at school level, successful processes of reflection and reflexivity require teachers and parents to directly access alternative sources of discourse rather than relying on those produced within the school context itself. Ball’s (1997b:266) advice that theory offers ‘the possibility of a different language’ for teachers, one not ‘caught up in the assumptions and inscriptions of policy-makers or the immediacy of practice’ thereby offering ‘a way of struggling against incorporation’, is relevant in this regard. Hardy’s (2014:501) finding that engaging with academia helped teachers resist or work around managerial
demands is also pertinent. While *Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997) can be seen as part of the INTO attempts to broaden teacher attitudes to parents, arguably it provided a rather weak challenge to traditionally inspired school cultures, given the traditional assumptions that were revealed when it was discursively analysed. The recent launch of the annual *Irish Teachers’ Journal* by the INTO indicates a commitment to increasing teacher access to academic discourses generally at the present time. Similarly, by providing online access to education journals free of charge to all registered teachers, the Teaching Council is encouraging democratic forms of professionalism among practicing teachers in terms of engagement with academic discourses, but anecdotal evidence suggests this initiative has a low profile among teachers, which arguably weakens its effectiveness. The removal of academic allowances for higher level study from teachers in 2011 (*Circular 70/2011*) suggests that the notion of the ‘activist’ professional (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs 2002) is not a policy priority of the DES. If the authority of conformity that is currently legitimising traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations at school level is to support democratic discourses in the future, then there is much work to be done in encouraging teachers to engage with democratic forms of professionalism and consequently, democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations.

Given that the agency of teachers and schools in Irish education has contributed to the authority of conformity within school cultures legitimating traditional discourses of parent-teacher relations, (especially at whole-school levels) it seems illogical to advocate greater individual agency as a strategy to legitimate democratic discourses. Nonetheless, the creation of democratic school communities requires parents and teachers to *choose* democratic approaches in their interactions with each other, in line with Evans’ (2011) understanding of enacted rather than demanded professionalism and, hence, requires individual agency, as noted in Section 5.3.2.3 above. According to the INTO interviewee, and discussed in Section 4.4.4.1, teachers in Ireland exercise their professionalism through wariness of and resistance to top-down initiatives until they evaluate them as being useful to their practice, and have gained public respect for the teaching profession as a result. Thus, the demonstration of teacher agency in relation to top-down discourse is acceptable in teacher narratives, but perhaps resistance to bottom-up discourses is less valourised. Agency in terms of evaluating and if appropriate resisting bottom-up as well as top-down discourses is necessary, therefore, if democratic discourses are to be legitimised at school level. Similarly, while the Education Consultant was confident that parent representatives at national levels are adequately empowered to remain loyal to their core values regardless of external pressures or expert influences, issues relating to the authority of conformity to traditional approaches are likely to be pertinent for parents at school level as well. The dialectic nature of discursive construction complicates this point regarding individual agency further. It can be contended that the promotion of democratic discourses at school level is to be achieved by encouraging individual agents to contest traditional and managerial discourses, and to reify democratic ones. These democratic discourses will then be (paradoxically) strengthened by the authority of conformity within school cultures.
5.5.2 Moral Evaluation

The legitimating power of moral evaluation (cf. Van Leeuwen 2007:97-100) can be closely linked to Foucauldian disciplinary techniques of normalisation, as discussed in Section 5.4.2. Nonetheless, it justifies discrete, if brief, discussion as a strategy of discursive legitimation, given its importance in the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations.

As was discussed in Section 5.4.1.1, the understanding that parental involvement in education is ‘good’ is a strongly presented truth of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations. Since it is very difficult to argue against something that is widely perceived to be ‘good’ or ‘right’ or ‘effective’, moral evaluation is clearly a powerful strategy for discursive legitimation. Given that all of the elite informants alluded to the ‘goodness’ of parental involvement, this is quite an explicit feature of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish education. Furthermore, the implication that a discourse strand agrees with the ‘natural order’ has been noted as a specific category of moral evaluation (Van Leeuwen 2007:99). Repetition of the word ‘natural’ was identified as a feature of Possibilities for Partnership in Section 4.2.2.4. This echoes the Irish Constitutional provision that parents are the ‘primary and natural educators’ of their children which indicates the historical depth of this form of discursive legitimation. However, the notion of ‘natural order’ may serve to focus attention on the parent-child relationship, and accordingly on parental involvement in the education of the individual child, rather than on democratic forms of involvement at whole-school level. Explicit moral evaluation, therefore, tends to legitimise the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in its current form, encouraging it to self-perpetuate. This provides a challenge to more democratically inspired discourses of parental involvement.

Notwithstanding the above point, that parental involvement is evaluated as ‘good’ is an important asset when seeking to increase democratic forms of parental involvement in schools. The increasing interest in parent-teacher relations over the past three decades (cf. Castelli & Pepe 2008) can be argued to have arisen from this positive evaluation. The use of language of improvement/enhancement/development with regard to parent-teacher relations may be useful in moving moral evaluation from legitimising current practices to legitimising more democratic ones, by presenting democratic approaches as the natural successor to current practices. Interestingly, this discourse of continuing improvement was noted in the accounts of the Educate Together and NPC-P respondents (Sections 4.9.4, 4.9.3) suggesting that they may have been utilising this legitimation strategy to promote democratic discourses.

5.5.3 Inter-discursivity

Although Van Leeuwen (2007:99) did not use the term ‘inter-discursivity’ when discussing less explicit modes of evaluation (such as abstraction and analogy), these strategies of legitimising one discourse/discourse strand with reference to another recognise the Foucauldian understanding of discourses as ‘fluid and often opportunistic’, drawing on, using and interacting with other discourses,
(cf. Carabine 2001) and so involve inter-discursivity. In the present study inter-discursivity between the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations and other Discourses and inter-discursivity among traditional, managerial and democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations was identified. The literature of discourse theory reviewed did not provide terminology to explicitly differentiate between these two forms of inter-discursivity. Perhaps cross-overs between ‘Big D’ Discourses could be referred to as ‘external inter-discursivity’, whereas intersections within a particular Discourse among various discourse strands might be described as ‘internal inter-discursivity’. In any event, inter-discursivity as a strategy of discursive legitimation (cf. Gale 1999:400) is relevant when the promotion of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations is being considered.

A number of examples of ‘external inter-discursivity’ were inferred from the discourse sources analysed during the research. For instance, the influence of Discourses relating to Active Citizenship (Schools for the Twenty-First Century Commission of the European Communities 2007; Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of Parents in Europe EPA 2008), State Responsibility, (Educate Together’s Mission, Vision and Values 2004), Equality/Inclusion (Building Partnership between Parents and Practitioners NCCA 2009; Mission, Vision and Values; Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life DES 2011), Multi/Inter-Culturalism (Mission, Vision and Values; Building Partnership between Parents and Practitioners) and Accountability/Bureaucracy (Education for Tomorrow NPC-P 2010; Schools for the Twenty-First Century) were identified. By linking with other Discourses that are widely accepted as legitimate, the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations further legitimises itself. Arguably the inclusion of references to Children’s Rights, ICT in classrooms and class size, which were ‘ideas in good currency’ (Schön 1971, cited by Galvin 2009:271) at the time of its publication, demonstrates an attempt by the authors of Education for Tomorrow to legitimise its statements. An example of inter-discursivity being used as a strategy of legitimation can also be identified in Possibilities for Partnership, albeit in reverse, as the discussion of parental involvement seemed to be used as a means for gaining support for other aspects of the INTO’s agenda, such as school accommodation, funding and teacher education (see Section 4.2.2.1).

‘Internal inter-discursivity’ among the discourses of traditional, managerial and democratic discourses that characterise the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations is evident from the outline of the discursive plane provided in Section 5.2. The inter-discursive nature of the Discourse in this sense can most easily be seen when it is considered as a series of divergent statements braided together: Parental involvement is ‘good’, but ‘dangerous’ unless controlled by teachers; Parental involvement is part of a teacher’s professional role, yet could damage teachers’ professional status; Parental involvement in national level policy-making is ‘good’, but is not so ‘good’ at school level; Parents are resources for schools, but parents need to be educated by schools; Parental involvement should focus on the education of their own child, but collective/whole-school involvement is the legislative focus. Notwithstanding the confusion caused by these conflicting strands, this confusion allows a sense that there is ‘something for everyone’ in the Discourse and, hence, can be a useful strategy of legitimisation.
Again *Possibilities for Partnership* is notable in this regard, as its deliberate efforts to encourage partnership while at the same time acknowledging the concerns of teachers who were very reluctant to engage with parents was directly discussed by the INTO respondent, and resulted in the inter-discursivity between traditional and democratic influences noted in *Chapter 4*.

Since inter-discursivity is central to discursual construction (Hyatt 2005:528) it is impossible to call for ‘purer’ forms of Discourse. While inter-discursivity can be viewed as a cause of contradiction and confusion, from a more optimistic perspective it can be argued that an inter-discursive approach supports the development of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. By allowing linkage and continuity with existing practice and discourses, it allows democratic approaches to be built on top of existing constructions, rather than demanding radical discontinuities. Indeed, the acknowledgement of teacher fears and concerns that were present in the comments of many of the interviewees can be regarded as an important pre-condition for the development of democratic approaches. If such concerns were to be ignored or dismissed, this would be to deny the importance of teacher voice. Furthermore, the tension identified between democratic and traditional influences allows space for reflection and debate, thereby contributing to democratic processes. Such democratic processes construct parent-teacher relations very differently than the certainty and assurance with which managerialism defines problems and provides solutions. This, however, adds to the complexity inherent in democratic constructions, as well as making them less palatable to policy-makers hoping for ‘quick fixes’.

5.5.4 *Recontextualisation*

Inter-discursivity and recontextualisation can be understood as related concepts, with recontextualisation involving a more intense version of inter-discursivity, where discursive concepts are re-located, re-imagined and re-interpreted outside of their original contexts (cf. Bernstein 1996, cited by Ball 1998). These ‘translations’ (Bowe, Ball with Gold 1992:119) allow similar sounding terms to mean very different things depending on the context in which they are applied, and so can be a strategy of discursive legitimation. Attending to recontextualisation allows an examination of aspects of discourse that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In terms of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, recontextualisation of discourse was most clearly observable in the research with regard to the differences between national and school level practices of parental involvement. For instance, according to the accounts of the IPPN and NPC-P respondents as well as the Senior Inspector and Education Consultant, ‘partnership with parents’ is interpreted differently at school levels than at national levels, and can be understood differently by teachers than parents. The re-created understanding of ‘partnership’ allows the continuation of traditional approaches to parents in many schools while at the same time permitting discursive acceptance of the ‘truth’ that parent-teacher partnership is ‘good’. The use of fundraising as a proxy
for parental involvement, as mentioned by the NPC-P interviewee, is a good example of this occurrence.

Recontextualisation then provides some explanation of how democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations can be overtly present in teacher/school produced texts, such as was identified in Possibilities for Partnership (INTO 1997) but in co-existence with traditional practices towards parents. McLaughlin’s concept of ‘reorientation change’ (1991 cited by Ball 1997b:261) is relevant here in terms of how organisations can take up the language associated with certain discourses, without necessarily embracing the core features of those discourses. Accordingly the language of democratic parent-teacher relations is recontextualised in the traditional settings of many schools.

The literature review revealed that managerial recontextualisation of democratic terminology is a feature of educational discourses internationally (cf. Connell 2009; Locke et al. 2005; Webb et al. 2004). While an awareness of this, and a direct challenge to managerialism was found in some Irish discourse sources analysed, such as in Possibilities for Partnership, by the Educate Together interviewee and by the Education Consultant; nevertheless, managerial discourses may be in the process of being gradually legitimised in Irish education through recontextualisation of policy and terminology. The co-existence of managerial elements in the Education Consultant’s account, despite her rejection of UK style approaches to parental involvement is symptomatic of this, for instance. Also, the concern of the Programme for Government (DES 2011) with providing parents with information for reasons of school choice implies a re-location of UK educational policy into an Irish context. In any event, through appropriating central concepts and re-articulating them for different purposes, recontextualisation can be a powerful strategy of discursive legitimation.

Since recontextualisation is often associated with the spread and dominance of managerial discourses (see Section 2.3.3.1), it tends to be regarded as a rather invidious concept. However, as Ball (cf. *inter alia* 1998, 2008:7) has comprehensively explained, recontextualisation of discourse between systems and levels is an inherent part of the discursive process. It acknowledges the imperfect nature of policy text, the crucial importance of local context, and provides scope for individual agency. Recontextualisation as a strategy of discursive legitimation can be thought of in positive as well as negative terms, therefore. If it serves to legitimise managerial discourses, there is little reason why it cannot be, similarly, channelled to legitimise democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations. Perhaps it is necessary to consider ‘re-recontextualisation’ of discourse strands that have been appropriated by traditional or managerial discourses, to reclaim them for democratic purposes.

A crucial part of such ‘re-recontextualisation’ would involve debating and clarifying concepts such as ‘partnership’, ‘involvement’ and ‘teacher professionalism’. The lack of discussion of these terms in most of the documents analysed was striking. This would appear to be relatively easily rectified in future documentation, especially since many of the elite informants were able to provide definitions of what they/their organisation understood parental involvement to be. As well as helping to clarify for readers what is meant by parental involvement in the context of any one document, the
process of defining the terminology would also lead to discussion as to how parental involvement/parent-teacher relations are understood in the Discourse. The process of agreeing definitions (or, indeed, new terminology with agreed definitions) offers possibilities in terms of building connections between various levels of the education system around the topic of parent-teacher relations as well. Notwithstanding this point, however, it would be unduly simplistic as well as contradictory of the understanding of discourse presented in the preceding sections, to assume that greater discursive clarity in policy documents would prevent re-interpretation in the contexts of practice. Rather, since policy documents can be conceptualised as narrowing or changing the range of options available to practitioners (cf. Ball 1997b:270), then the effect of reclaiming democratic concepts for democratic purposes can only extend to offering a set of more democratic possibilities than heretofore. Hence, the importance of discussion and reflection as part of democratic processes. Very complex issues are involved in exploring democratic relationships between parents and schools, particularly in whole-school aspects as was, for instance, demonstrated by media accounts of the Birmingham schools ‘Trojan Horse’ story (cf. Phipps 2014; Gilligan 2014). Nevertheless, the complicated nature of this issue should not be allowed thwart necessary debate.

5.5.5 Mythopoesis

Van Leeuwen’s (2007:105) discussion of the effect of ‘moral or cautionary tales’ on discursive legitimation is relevant to the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, in light of the anecdotal nature of some of the elite interviewees’ accounts. This was particularly true of the INTO and Educate Together respondents’ contributions. The ‘Learning Experiences’ sections of Building Partnership between Parents and Practitioners (NCCA 2009), similarly, reveal the emphasis placed on storytelling as a mode of discursive legitimation, in that the ‘Learning Experiences’ serve as moral tales legitimising partnership approaches to parents.

It can be contended, therefore, that building up a stock of ‘moral tales’ that demonstrate the value of parental involvement, and ‘cautionary tales’ that indicate the disadvantages of not including parents in meaningful ways, would be a useful way of legitimising democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations, particularly at school level. This requires a re-consideration of the possibilities offered by ‘safe involvement’, discussed in Sections 2.2.4.1 and 4.2.2.4 as a feature of traditional discourses. ‘Safe’ involvement seems designed to placate parental demands for greater involvement while not affecting the status quo of teacher influence in the school. Such tolerated involvement can be viewed as a potential source of positive anecdotes about parental involvement within the school culture, and so may gradually serve to legitimise more meaningful forms of parental involvement. Focussing parental involvement at first on areas where the advantages to children are most easily seen, in which parents tend to have most interest and about which teachers are likely to be least fearful seems wise in ensuring that the story building will not be counter-productive. While many schools, particularly DEIS ones, are engaging with parents in these ways already, the interview data, especially
Analysis of the discursive plane of parent-teacher relations

from the Senior Inspector and NPC-P respondent, would suggest that many are not. The focus of *Possibilities for Partnership* (INTO 1997) on including parents in 'safe' initiatives such as paired reading schemes is relevant to this point, given that the INTO informant discussed how moving teachers towards an acceptance of parental involvement was an objective of that document. Hence, ‘safe’ involvement can be seen as a way of gradually legitimating parental involvement in schools.

Admittedly, the particular example of fundraising, as discussed by INTO, IPPN, NPC-P and *Educate Together* respondents, seems to demonstrate the limited effects of mythopoesis as a strategy of discursive legitimation. Despite many positive ‘stories’ about parental fundraising efforts, successful parental involvement in fundraising does not often lead to more meaningful forms of involvement by parents at school level. On the contrary, however, the Senior Inspector described a momentum behind the topic of parental involvement at the present time and the improvement that has occurred over the past three decades. The INTO interviewee was clear that teachers are much less reluctant about parental involvement now that they were in the past. Arguably this reduced fearfulness can be associated with the positive stories of parent-teacher relations that have been built up since at least the foundation of the NPC-P in 1985, thereby supporting the notion that mythopoesis can be effective in legitimising democratic discourses.

**5.5.6 Summary of how constructions of parent-teacher relations may be challenged and/or supported to enhance parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish primary education**

With regard to the third research question then (How can constructions of parent-teacher relations be challenged and/or supported as applicable, in order to enhance parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish primary education?), it is contended from a Foucauldian discursive stance that authorisation, moral evaluation, inter-discursivity, recontextualisation and mythopoesis are all relevant strategies legitimising the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish education at the present time. While the research suggests they are legitimising a combination of traditional (especially at school levels) and democratic approaches to parent-teacher relations at the moment, these strategies offer possibilities through which more strongly democratic discourses might be legitimised and reified into the future. In practical terms this requires attending to the creation of school communities where longstanding habits and customs are critically evaluated, where alternative viewpoints are welcomed and where individuals have the agency to implement change. The role of research and academia in presenting arguments for greater parental involvement and the necessity to support teachers and parents in accessing varied sources of discourse is noted. Presenting democratic parent-teacher relations as a natural progression rather than a radical change seems a useful strategy, as does overtly linking democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations with other discourse strands that have high legitimacy among teachers and parents. A ‘re-recontextualisation’ of democratic terms so that they are understood in more democratic and less managerial ways is advocated, especially as this process
should contribute to the debate and discussion that has to be an inherent feature of genuinely
democratic approaches. Celebrating positive experiences of parent-teacher interactions also seems
helpful for emphasising the positive nature of democratic aspects of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher
Relations in Irish primary education.

5.6 Conclusion to chapter

Having considered each of the research questions in turn; Do the discourses of parental
involvement and teacher professionalism construct parent-teacher relations in Irish primary
education?; What implications do constructions have of parental involvement have for parent-teacher
relations in Irish education?; How can constructions of parent-teacher relations be challenged and/or
supported to enhance parent-teacher relations and parental involvement in Irish primary education?
this thesis argues that in light of the legitimating principles, truths, norms and power relations in the
Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, a number of strategies of legitimation to enhance democratic
constructions of parent-teacher relations can be identified. It is the researcher’s opinion that these
strategies should be advanced to improve parent-teacher relations in Irish education, although she
recognises that this is not a straightforward or linear process. These strategies include the authorisation
of democratic constructions, the mobilisation of the existing moral evaluation that parental
involvement is ‘good’, the utilisation of inter-discursivity to strengthen democratic discourse strands,
the ‘re-recontextualisation’ of language for democratic purposes and the building up of a stock of
‘moral tales’ to support democratic approaches to parental involvement in schools.

Two concerns remain outstanding in relation to this argument. Firstly, the nominalisations
presented above conceal somewhat the actors who might be best positioned to engage with the
promotion of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. The particular responsibility of
teachers as agents of discursive legitimation of democratic constructions is, therefore, addressed in the
next chapter. Secondly, for explanatory and organisational purposes, the argument has thus far been
made mainly within the context of Irish education. Given the nature of discursive construction,
coupled with the increasing importance of the supra-national level on national educational policy-
making, and to fulfil the requirements of the three level model around which the research was
structured, it is necessary to consider Irish education within broader framing contexts. The possibility
of external (particularly European) influences impacting on the reification of democratic discourses of
parent-teacher relations in Ireland is accordingly considered in the next chapter.
6. The transformative potential of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations for Irish education

6.1 Introduction to chapter

The preceding chapter argues, based on a Foucauldian approach to discourse, that traditional (especially at school level) and democratic (especially at national level) constructions of parent-teacher relations construct the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish primary education, with evidence of strengthening managerial influences also circulating within the discursive space. It contended that parent-teacher relations (and, consequently, the education system generally) would be improved if democratic discourses were reinforced, particularly at school level, and possible means through which this might be advanced were outlined. This chapter concludes the discussion by considering two related aspects; the responsibility and necessity of the teaching profession promoting democratic discourses, and the challenges presented by the influence of managerial assumptions from the supra-national context on Irish educational policy-making and practice. It is suggested in conclusion that the increasing influence of the supra-national/European policy-making space, while making democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations more difficult to achieve, also increases the requirement for such democratic constructions, as a means to protect teacher professionalism and, consequently, educational quality. Indeed, to use Gallagher’s (2014) analogy, parent-teacher relations form an important component of the ‘vaccine’ required to inoculate Irish education from the ‘germ’ of managerialism that is so prevalent internationally. Thus, the critique of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations allows potentially helpful interventions in practice to be identified, in keeping with core principles of DHA orientated research.

6.2 Teachers as crucial agents in the legitimation of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations

The role of teachers in determining the development of parental involvement at school level was demonstrated throughout the research, specifically through the differences identified in the school and national level approaches to parents in Irish education. Teachers then are crucially placed in the discursive legitimation of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations, particularly at school level, albeit the responsibility of other stakeholders is not denied. Within the Irish context, there is cause initially to be optimistic that the teaching profession has the capacity to engage democratically with parents, thereby supporting activist professional constructs.

6.2.1 Teacher agency as a key factor in the development of parent-teacher relations

By exploring parent-teacher relations through a teacher professionalism perspective, the research assumed a crucial role for teachers in the development of parent-teacher relations. This contention was supported by the research findings, most especially by the difference noted between
parental involvement at school levels and at national levels in Ireland. Leaving aside for the present the managerial undertones that are discussed in Section 6.3 below, democratic discourses were identified both in the documents of national level organisations and in the accounts of the practices of parental involvement at national level in Ireland, to the extent that both the NPC-P respondent and Education Consultant talked of parental involvement at national policy-making levels in Ireland providing a model for Europe. It might be expected that these top-down influences would be constructive of widespread democratic practices at school level, but this expectation was not reflected in the accounts provided of school level practice. Indeed, as noted in Section 4.2.4.5, the Education Consultant commented on how each Parent Association has to make the case for itself in each individual school, despite the acceptance of parental involvement at national levels. The gap between national and school level approaches can be explained by the traditional constructions entrenched in teacher discourses, albeit school and teacher autonomy has an effect on the wide variety of practices existing at school level. The entrenchment of traditional discourses was especially apparent in relation to whole-school forms of involvement. The tentative nature of Possibilities for Partnership, seeking to promote partnerships but also having to attend to reassuring teachers, provides evidence of these deep-rooted traditional constructions. The difference in the position of parents at national levels compared to school levels reveals the crucial role played by teachers in restricting and controlling the development of parent-teacher relations at school level. This results in a hybrid traditional/democratic Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations dominating at present in Irish education, albeit within an increasingly managerial context, as was shown in Diagram 1. It also provides an example of the Foucauldian understanding of ‘power in discourse’ (cf. Jäger & Maier 2009), demonstrating how discourses always contain contradictions that can be mobilised by individuals, allowing them to exercise agency within the discursive context.

The teaching profession, then, has a great responsibility if democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations are to become dominant at school level in Irish education. Teachers, both individually and collectively, seem well placed to be tasked with engaging with the strategies of discursive legitimation (cf. Van Leeuwen 2007) discussed in Section 5.5. As the case of parent-teacher relations itself shows, however, this is not easily achieved through top-down processes. Indeed, the expectation of the success of a top-down approach suggests a poor understanding of discursive re-contextualisation and the limitations of policy texts in practice, although this is not to deny that top-down initiatives may have a role in stimulating the thought and discussion that is necessary for professional development. Rather the teaching profession itself needs to commit to a more activist professional orientation (cf. Sachs 1999) that includes parents as meaningful partners in the education of their children. As Section 5.5.1.3 explained, teacher agency is crucial in this process. Such a professional orientation seems likely to rely in the main on the genuine commitment of teachers to educational improvement in a meaningful sense.
This analysis positions teachers as important agents in the discursive legitimation of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. This should not be taken to imply a passive positioning of parents, however, as to do so would be inherently undemocratic. The responsibility of parents as well as teachers in advancing parent-teacher partnership, noted, for instance, in the account of the Senior Inspector in Section 4.4.4.6, must be recognised in any account of parental involvement in schools. Such recognition can be identified in the NPC-P respondent’s description of the role of the NPC-P and individual Parents’ Associations in supporting parents to take on this responsibility. Nor should the responsibility of those involved in the DES, teacher education, curriculum support, and representative bodies in encouraging democratic parent-teacher relations at school as well as national levels, be ignored. All of the interviewees professed that parental involvement was an important concern of their organisation, which is heartening, even if the enactment of this falls short at school level, as seen throughout Chapter 4. Notwithstanding shared responsibilities, given the central and ongoing position of teachers in schools, legitimation of democratic discourses by and through teachers is an essential starting point for the development of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations at school level. It is crucial that teachers engage with this responsibility, given the fluctuating and contested nature of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, since the absence of such legitimating agency allows for discursive spaces to develop at school level which can then be exploited by managerial constructions.

6.2.2 Initial cause for optimism regarding the capacity of the Irish teaching profession to legitimate democratic discourses

As discussed in Section 5.5, the prevailing Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations, despite its fused traditional/democratic nature, offers much potential as a basis from which teachers (and others in the education system) can legitimize a more democratic construction of parent-teacher relations in Irish education; for instance, through authorisation, moral evaluation, inter-discursivity, recontextualisation and mythopoesis. Most of the legitimating principles identified in Section 5.3.2 as underpinning the existing Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations have the potential to enable a more democratically inspired Discourse; especially the emphasis on child-centred education, the acceptance of parents as primary educators of their children, the understanding that schools should be part of their local communities, and the high trust that exists within the Irish education system currently. Similarly, ‘truth-claims’ of the Discourse, such as that parental involvement is ‘good’, that parent-teacher relations have improved greatly in recent years and that parents and teachers have shared interests could advance a more democratically inspired discourse as well. That an inter-discursive traditional/democratic Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations remains dominant in Irish education indicates that resistance to managerialism has been effective, as outlined in Section 4.3.5, albeit the constrained nature of such resistance is considered below.
Most importantly when specifically considering teachers as agents of democratic discursive legitimation, the potential for teachers to exercise power within the existing Discourse has been identified, for instance, in Section 5.4.3. The example of the retention of traditional approaches to parents at school level in the face of opposing influences coming from national levels aptly demonstrates the extent of such agency, although the possibility that parental involvement has not been a policy priority of the DES is also a relevant factor. Despite traditional strands being entrenched in teacher discourses, that there is a discursive acceptance of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations at individual levels, as well as the democratic approaches evident in teacher discourse at national levels, provides reason for optimism with regard to the legitimating potential of the teaching body. The many democratic assumptions discussed in Section 4.4 provide further cause for optimism regarding the possibility of strengthening democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations. The capacity of the Irish teaching profession to engage with activist forms of professionalism was acknowledged, for example, by the INTO respondent who noted how Irish teachers have been willing to upgrade their professional knowledge and critically evaluate new policy developments, as well as having the autonomy to implement initiatives that they judge to be beneficial.

In spite of the acknowledged need for ‘massive culture change’ in Irish schools in relation to parent-teacher interactions, as the Senior Inspector noted, the relatively slow progress of parental involvement at school levels over the past three decades, and the challenging nature of activist professionalism (cf. Groundwater Smith & Sachs 2002), it is reasonable to argue, when considering internal features of the Irish education system, that the teaching profession is well placed with regard to its responsibility to engage meaningfully with parents.

However, widening the framing context (cf. Gee 2011b) of Irish education to consider the influence of the supra-national space complicates this argument, given the dominance of managerialism identified in discourse sources from outside of Ireland, and the evidence of their growing influence on Irish education policy and practice, particularly at DES levels. The next section considers the challenges posed by these increasingly prevalent managerial constructions.

6.3 The influence of the supra-national context on the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations.

The diagram presented in Section 5.3.2.2 drew attention to the possibility that managerial influences from supra-national and European bodies exert an influence on the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Irish education, even when traditional or democratic influences appear strong. Some examples of these managerial discourse strands are summarised below, and their possible impact on DES policy noted. This highlights the important consequences of ‘managerial creep’ in Irish educational policy, especially with regard to the alternative perspective such ‘creep’ provides on the democratic constructions of parental involvement that were described in Section 4.4. The notion of
‘managerial creep’ leads to the examination of parental involvement as a policy lever (cf. Hyatt 2013) more than a policy objective, and raises concerns about the interpellation (cf. Edley 2001) of parents by and on behalf of managerial discourses.

6.3.1 ‘Managerial creep’ from supra-national /European contexts into Irish educational policy-making space

Claims that managerial principles are dominant in education policies across a variety of international settings (cf. Webb et al. 2004) and in supra-national institutions such as the World Bank, the OECD and the EU (cf. Ball 2008) were discussed in Section 2.3.2.3. Although the limited nature of the international discourse sources analysed during the present research means it was not possible to conclusively evaluate the veracity of these claims (nor was such evaluation an aim of the research), nonetheless, the discourse analysis undertaken on documents originating in European and supra-national contexts raises some interesting points in support of the contention that managerialism exerts considerable influence on their construction of parent-teacher relations, as outlined in Section 4.3. For example, the assumption of How can we Make Schools Work Better? (World Bank 2012) that the success of parental involvement initiatives can be measured solely through test results demonstrated a strongly managerial approach to the issue. Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies (OECD 2012) addressed parental involvement quite instrumentally in terms of its value as a method of raising test results. The notion of teachers needing to be more accountable to parents as a means of school improvement was strongly apparent in Commission Staff Working Paper, Schools for the 21st Century (Commission of the European Communities 2007). The idea that policy-makers might seek to limit parental empowerment in accordance with their own aims was inferred from European Report on the Quality of School Education: Sixteen Quality Indicators (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture May 2000). Admittedly managerial influences are easier to identify in international than Irish documentation, given the wariness of managerialism that exists in Ireland. Also not all of the international documentation demonstrated strongly managerial approaches, with Involve Parents, Improve School (EACEA 2009) inferring more democratic constructions, for instance. Indeed, the co-existence of democratic and managerial strands in the same document was noted throughout Sections 4.3 and 4.4; for example, in Parental Involvement in Selected PISA Countries and Economies. Nevertheless, the notion of the dominance of managerialism in supra-national and European policy-making was not disputed by the analysis of the documentation.

In light of the increasing privatisation of educational policy-making (cf. Lawn 2001), the emergence of a European education policy-making space (cf. Grek & Lawn 2009), greater cross national policy-borrowing (cf. Lingard 2010) and the influence exerted by supra-national organisations (cf. Ball 2003) discussed in Section 2.6.3.3, it would be expected that the presence of managerial approaches to parent-teacher relations in supra-national policy documents would be reflected in Irish
policy documents and practices. As already discussed in Section 4.3.5, such managerial influences were not found to be dominant in the Irish education policies analysed, and many of the interviewees explicitly rejected managerial approaches to education. Possible reasons for this were discussed in Section 4.3.5. An initial critical reading of the research findings, therefore, suggested a clear-cut dichotomy between traditional constructions of teachers at school level and democratic constructions at national levels. This reading was interesting from a Foucauldian perspective in terms of what it revealed about the micro-politics of power, teacher agency within their own schools and classrooms, and the limitations of the State in implementing policy at school level (cf. inter alia Popkewitz & Brennan 1998; Gale 1999; McHoul & Grace 1993). It exposed the complexities of discourse production with regard to the inter-connectedness of discourse and practice, and also regarding the relationships between top-down and bottom-up drivers of policy and discourse (cf. inter alia Jäger & Maier 2009; Gee 2011). As interesting and insightful as this traditional/democratic interpretation is, however, it is disrupted by the identification in Section 4.3 of managerial constructions in some of the Irish discourse sources analysed, even if they were not deemed to be dominant. This challenge, coupled with the need for reflexivity and doubt in discourse analysis as noted in Section 3.3.5.4, necessitated a further consideration of the consequences of these managerial influences with regard to the discursive positioning of parents and teachers in Irish education. The presence of managerial constructions in DES documentation is particularly noteworthy in this regard, with possibly very damaging consequences for Irish education.

As is evident from Section 4.3, the recent DES documents analysed contained more strongly managerial references than other Irish source documents, inferring a discursive dissonance between the DES and other groups involved in text production in Irish education (although the possible exception of NPC-P, as expressed through Education for Tomorrow is discussed below). For instance, the Programme for Government appended to the DES Statement of Strategy is concerned with providing information to parents for school choice purposes. A re-interpretation of the longstanding local management of Irish primary schools to suit managerial priorities was also inferred from it. Quite a number of managerial features were identified in Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life, including its interest in parental involvement as a means to raise pupil attainments; its conceptualisation of parent knowledge in terms of a deficit; its concern with standardisation and measurability; and the possibility that it places schools in competition to each other. The certainty and urgency with which Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life constructs and provides solutions to the problem of literacy and numeracy in Irish schools, described in Section 4.3.1.2, accords with Skilling’s (2014:61) ‘narrative of constant crisis’ that is often a feature of managerial policy-making. The use of managerial terminology and a managerial perspective on issues such as assessment and evaluation were noted as features of the Senior Inspector’s account in Section 4.3.4.6, as well as which she explicitly described the influence of Europe on Irish educational policy-making as being ‘very strong’. Given that the influence of the European education policy-making space and of supra-national
institutions might be expected to be identified in the first instance at State level, these managerial
inferences in Department documentation and by Department personnel are highly significant in terms
of identifying ‘managerial creep’, as it was termed in Section 4.3.5, into Irish educational policy-
making. It is in the context of ‘managerial creep’ that the responsibility of teachers in advancing new
relationships with parents becomes of crucial and, indeed, urgent importance in Irish education.

6.3.2 ‘Managerial creep’ challenging the dominance of democratic constructions of parent-
teacher relations at national levels

The notion of ‘managerial creep’ in Irish education policy at state levels raises questions about
the extent to which the democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations (and of the education
system more generally) identified in Section 4.4 actually exist at national levels in Irish education. It
introduces the possibility that democratic approaches to parents and other education ‘partners’ may
overlay managerially inspired intentions. The apparently democratic inclusion of certain ‘partners’ at
national level may relate more to the pragmatic concerns of alliance-building by policy-makers rather
than a genuine commitment to democratic principles. Partnership approaches may, in McKay and
Garrett’s (2013:735) terms, be merely ‘masquerades’. Certain partners may be unaware of its
deceptive nature, or in the case of those who seem to enjoy more influence as a result of it, be
unconcerned by it, at least as long as their agendas agree with those of the DES.

Inter-discursivity between democratic and managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations
in the Irish documents analysed and in the interviewee accounts assume a particular importance when
the possibility of partnership as ‘masquerade’ is being explored. For example, the managerial
assumptions of the parent education model found in the otherwise strongly democratic Building
Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners may be read as significant in terms of the positioning
of parents as future allies of government policy, rather than being just an aberration from democratic
principles. Similarly, the Educate Together respondent’s account, summarised in Section 4.4.4.4, of an
absence of partnership between the DES and the school management bodies can be viewed as
especially insightful rather than an anomaly. Likewise, although the INTO respondent was generally
positive about partnership at national levels, his comments about the DES not listening to teachers
with regard to the Junior Certificate reforms, and that sense of not being listened to being ‘a bit of a
shock in Irish education’ can be interpreted as significant in terms of indicating a shift towards
managerial approaches. This is particularly relevant when the contrary, (included) experience of the
NPC-P in relation to the Junior Certificate reform process is considered, as it was in Section
4.3.4.1. These different experiences and perspectives indicate a moving of influence away from
teachers, towards parents. The Education Consultant also commented that the teacher unions and
management bodies may not be as influential with the DES as they used to be, although she did not
seem to view this as a dis-improvement. There are indications, therefore, that the relationship between
the DES and other education partners is changing, with parents achieving a more powerful role.
While the inclusion of parent representatives in influential positions could be indicative of democratic constructions, the managerial undercurrents identified in DES policy above cast doubt on democratic inferences. Rather it can be argued that the DES is using discursive processes to prepare the Irish educational landscape for the introduction of particular policy objectives. The inclusion of parents in national policy-making contexts may relate to the ‘seeding’ of policy ideas, ensuring that Departmental objectives are ‘in good currency’ within the Context of Influence, as was explained in Section 2.6.2.1. The discursive legitimacy achieved when something is understood to be ‘what parents want’ makes the parent body a powerful ally for policy-makers, as discussed with regard to the ‘truth’ that parental involvement is ‘good’ in Section 5.4.1.1. The ostensibly democratic approaches to parents at national level may be primarily concerned with promoting, in Foucauldian terms, ‘a regime of truth’, of shared interests between parents and the DES, to advance this alliance and so allow the DES greater influence over parent discourse. This also has the effect of challenging the ‘truth’ of shared interests between parents and teachers, and may ‘other’ the discourse of teachers as less ‘good’ than that of parents/State, thereby weakening the place of teachers in the production of educational discourse.

Other points from the research findings seem initially to challenge this contention, however. For instance, the Education Consultant, notwithstanding her opinion about the lessening influence of teachers and management bodies, remarked that it is a challenge for the DES ‘to exercise the influence it properly ought to have as the guardian of the rights of children to a quality education’. This seems to contradict the likelihood of a managerially inspired and more powerful DES, until the de-centralisation/re-centralisation paradox of managerialism is considered (cf. Ball 2008). Indeed, her concluding comment on this issue ‘the Department is exerting itself to some extent but maybe not in the ways that it needs to!’ infers the possibility that the DES can and does demonstrate its direct power over the education system with regard to its policy priorities, but is content to allow a more decentralised approach to issues that it regards as less important. Parental involvement at school level may be one such issue, as discussed below.

Similarly, the NPC-P respondent’s enthusiasm about the close working relationship between the DES and the NPC-P, along with the examples she provided of the NPC-P influencing the DES, as discussed in Section 4.4.4.3, seem initially to reject the possibility of managerial approaches at national level, at least where parents are concerned. Considering parental involvement as a policy lever or political tool rather than a policy priority, raised in Section 5.4.3.3, casts a different light on these seemingly democratic relationships, however. The absence of DES documents that address parental involvement explicitly and in detail (at the time of writing at least), and the analysis of the DES Statement of Strategy/Programme for Government suggest that parental involvement of itself may not be a high policy priority for the DES. Rather it can be argued that greater attention has been paid to it as an instrument to achieve other DES policy priorities, such as, for instance, increasing education quality through a school choice mechanism (Programme for Government), ensuring teacher
The transformative potential of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations for Irish education

compliance with the Croke Park Agreement (cf. Circular 08/11; Circular 65/11; Circular 45/13), changing the patronage structures of the education system (Forum for Patronage and Pluralism), emphasising the importance of standardised assessments in schools (sample questions for Board of Management members in Constitution and Rules of Procedures for Boards of Management 2011) and as a means to raise student attainments in literacy and numeracy (Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life). As discussed in Section 2.3.3.2, an instrumental approach to parental involvement can of itself be indicative of managerial assumptions, aside from the managerial objectives it is being used to lever.

The influence of the NPC-P, despite its small size and funding constrains, was described as larger than might be expected in Section 5.2.2.6, with the NPC-P interviewee noting how other parents’ groups in Europe were envious of its influence and inclusion. While this can be presented as evidence of democratic discourses of parental involvement at national levels, it may also be insightful with regard to managerial discourses and the instrumental use of parental involvement. For instance, the NPC-P respondent’s explanation of how the NPC-P were invited by the DES to put their logo on the How can Primary Schools Make All Children Feel Included and Involved? pamphlets sent to parents was outlined in Section 4.4.4.3. The NPC-P interviewee discussed how the NPC-P logo, as a logo of a trusted body, encouraged parents to see this initiative as a valuable one. While she conceptualised such action as indicating the joint action and partnership enjoyed by the DES and NPC, such a course of action by the DES can also be viewed from managerial perspectives as a means of increasing their chances of achieving a particular policy priority, in this case related to school patronage, rather than being necessarily indicative of a democratic approach to parental involvement. Similarly, returning to the example of Junior Certificate reform mentioned above, the active inclusion of the NPC-P in the Junior Certificate reform process, and the attention paid to it by Minister Quinn in his address to their national conference in June 2014, is particularly notable given that the NPC-P is a primary rather than a post-primary representative group. While of course parents of primary school children will be affected by Junior Certificate reform in the future, the possibility that the success of the NPC-P in comparison with its post-primary sibling has made it a particularly useful ally for the DES seems relevant. That the Education Consultant remarked on how, in the past, the NPC-P were ‘used’ and ‘gazumped’ by other interests, including those of the DES, supports this argument.

Although, as noted above, the initial analysis of Irish discourse sources did not find managerial constructions to be dominant in most of them, the conceptualisation of ‘managerial creep’ in Irish education results in greater significance being attached to those managerial references that were found, even when they were tentatively identified. This is especially true of parent discourses, as it can be argued that parents are more readily interpellated by managerial discourses than are teachers. The dangers associated with complacency arising from the ‘truth’ that parental involvement is a ‘solved’ problem in Irish education at the present time were discussed with regard to the consequences for parents in Section 5.4.1.2, but can also be seen as dangerous for teacher professionalism, in that
parental disappointment with being excluded from influence at school level may encourage them to support managerial constructions. The strongly managerial tone of Education for Tomorrow, as discussed extensively in Sections 4.3.1.3, 4.3.2.1 and 4.3.2.2 becomes, therefore, very noteworthy. The low trust it exhibited towards teachers, as well as having an inherently managerial flavour, may indicate an ‘othering’ (cf. Janks 1997) of teacher discourses as less committed to education quality than those of parents. It is also notable given her long history of involvement with the NPC-P, that a number of managerial features of the Education Consultant’s account were discussed in Section 4.3.4.5. As outlined in Sections 4.3.4.3 and 4.4.4.3, the NPC-P respondent’s account centred on strongly democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations and, indeed, the difference between it and Education for Tomorrow was striking. Nonetheless, the building and maintenance of positive relationships with the DES was a recurrent feature of her account. Much of the success of the NPC-P seemed to be attributed to and evaluated through the good relationship it enjoys with the DES. It can be argued, therefore, that this positioning of the NPC-P as ‘onside’ with the DES is evidence of managerial strategies at work, and provides the DES with a significant source of power and legitimation for their policy-making. As noted in Section 5.4.1.5, however, the emphasis placed on this good ‘democratic’ relationship with the DES may actually serve to weaken democratic discourses, as the priority placed on the maintenance of that relationship may serve to constrain the independent action of the NPC-P. That the NPC-P respondent herself discussed how ‘careful’ and ‘responsible’ the NPC-P is in its lobbying lends credence to this possibility.

It is reasonable to contend, based on the deep level critical analysis undertaken around this research, that managerial constructions of parent-teacher relations are increasingly influencing the Irish education policy-making space. While certain unique features of the Irish education system, including the autonomous nature of school provision and the strength of teacher unions, combined with strong traditional (at school level) and democratic discourses (at national level) have hindered the spread of managerialism, the above account outlines how managerial discourses have begun a process of recontextualising democratic spaces in Irish educational decision-making. The use of parental involvement as a policy lever to achieve State objectives provides an excellent example of this. Managerial influences can, therefore, be traced from supra-national and European levels, through DES policy and into parent discourses.

Given the de-professionalising consequences of managerial discourses, this ‘managerial creep’ has to be of considerable concern for teachers. Since managerial and democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations are oppositional to each other, it adds to the challenges of teachers tasked with the responsibility of encouraging genuine partnerships between parents and teachers.
6.4 Authentic parent-teacher partnership as a component of the vaccine against ‘managerial creep’

The access teachers have to parents, teacher control over interactions with parents and the necessity that parental involvement be prevented from being used as a political tool to achieve managerial objectives in educational policy-making, determines that parent-teacher relations have to be an important element in resisting managerialism in Irish education. This significant challenge is relevant to all levels of the education system in Ireland.

6.4.1 Suitability of parent-teacher relations as a means to resist managerial discourses

While it is tempting perhaps to accept the inward creep of the ‘slouching beast’ of managerialism (Ball 2013) with resignation, viewing it as a powerful motivating factor for activist professionalism would seem to be a more assertive response. Since democratic professional constructs arose initially in reply to the emergence of managerialism (cf. Sachs 1999) this seems a realistic possibility. Given that practices in Irish education have withstood many of the accountability-based features of managerialism longer than many other countries (cf. Sugrue 2011, 2006), that as noted in Section 4.3.5 Irish education does not provide a readily accessible space for managerialism, and that the teaching body is coming to a greater awareness of the dangers of managerialism (cf. proceedings of INTO’s 2014 Consultative Conference in Education) Irish teachers seem well positioned at the present time to engage with activist models of professionalism so they can resist managerial pressures. This favourable position is not guaranteed in the long-term, however, given that as managerial constructions of teacher professionalism ‘creep’ in, they weaken the resistance of the teaching profession. The way in which the bureaucratic demands of the performativity agenda sap teachers’ energy was discussed in Section 2.3.3.4. Therefore, greater engagement with democratic professionalism is an urgent matter if the contested space of educational policy-making is not to be ceded to managerial interests.

The case of parent-teacher relations and parental involvement offers particular potential as a starting point for such a renewal of activist professionalism, for a number of reasons. Every school and every teacher has access to, and considerable control over their interactions with, a parent body. Parent-teacher interactions at school and individual level are not highly regulated or mandated in the main, except with regard to the rules for establishing of Parents’ Associations (cf. Parents as Partners in Education DES 1991, also Supporting Each Other NPC-P & IPPN 2010). Schools and teachers, therefore, have the capacity to develop parent-teacher partnership initiatives in their own school. If, as claimed above, parental involvement of itself and especially at school level does not rank highly as a DES priority at present, teachers and schools have considerable scope to determine their own interactions with parents, much more so than would be possible in areas that the DES is prioritising. Therefore, the field of parent-teacher relations offers more space for the production and circulation of alternative discourses than other more tightly and directly controlled fields. It offers a potentially
useful location in which Foucault’s notion of the individual as a vehicle of power, rather than merely its point of application (cf. Foucault 1980:98) might be demonstrated. Through new forms of relationships with parents, teachers may be both able to exercise influence in the Context of Influence, and to demonstrate the worthiness of that influence through the enhancement of professionalism that such relationships require (cf. Hargreaves 2000).

The sense that parental involvement is being used as a policy lever to achieve managerial objectives also increases its significance as a starting point through which to legitimise democratic constructions, in order to prevent parental opinion being manipulated as an instrument of teacher de-professionalisation. Teachers need to build on and maintain the high trust that the teaching profession has traditionally enjoyed in Ireland, through being open to sharing their work with parents and being accountable in a responsive sense (cf. Forster 1999). The arguments made in Possibilities for Partnership about partnership with parents being a useful strategy to support teacher professionalism are still applicable in the present day Irish context. Rather, however, than merely being inspired by a self-interested professionalism, as was critiqued in Possibilities for Partnership in Section 4.2.1.2, such partnership needs to be inspired by an activist identity, which through concern with the welfare of others and the common good (cf. Sachs 1999) should greatly contribute to the success of the education system in general. Teachers must take a more assertive stance in challenging the use of parental involvement as a policy lever for the achievement of managerial objectives. Parental involvement needs to be ‘re-recontextualised’ (cf. Section 5.3.4) as a policy lever for the achievement of democratic objectives instead.

6.4.2 A challenge for teachers at individual, school and national levels

The treatment of the three levels of the education system in Section 2.6.3.3 and throughout Chapter 4 drew attention to how discourses are experienced, produced, accepted and resisted differently in different places in the education system. Likewise, the necessity for engaging with democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations has different emphasises depending on whether one is considering individual, community or systemic locations. The challenging nature of this engagement at all levels of the system is not denied.

For the individual teacher the notion of authentic parent-teacher partnerships forming part of the response against managerial constructs of professionalism should be a powerful motivating factor for teacher engagement with constructs of authentic partnership. It offers a compelling alternative to a gradual slide into the narrow, bureaucratically accountable model of the technicist teacher that contradicts many of the longstanding legitimating principles of Irish education (such as child-centredness, teacher autonomy and high trust). While it would be naive to imagine that improved parent-teacher relationships alone are sufficient to entirely challenge the influence of managerialism at school levels, as noted above they offer a good starting point from which to build momentum for that challenge. Through engaging in relationships with parents that fulfil the requirements of genuine
partnership described in Section 2.4 the individual teacher plays a part in ‘seeding’ notions of
democratic teacher professionalism in local and public discourses.

An acceptance of the need for good relationships between community and school was
identified as a recurring theme of the existing Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Section
4.4.1.4, to such an extent that it was described as a legitimating principle of the Discourse in Section
5.3.2.5. The community aspects of democratic parent-teacher relationships offer much for parents,
teachers and schools, as they provide a direct challenge to internationally dominant discourses of
school choice and market models of school provision. The damaging consequences of such models for
parent-teacher relations as well as for education more generally were discussed in Section 2.3.3.6. (cf.
Forster 1999). Given that the need to align schools with their local communities is a legitimating
principle of the existing Discourse, school-community initiatives may offer particular potential as
beginning points for new types of relationships between parents and schools/teachers, allowing these
new relationships to be framed by assumptions that are already taken for granted. Their relatively
‘safe’ nature may also serve to bridge the gap noted in the research between parental involvement
of individual and whole-school types. Again, by engaging with relationships with their local communities
that fulfil the requirements of authentic partnership, schools are acting as ‘seeders’ of democratic
constructions of professionalism into wider public discourses.

The responsibility of the teaching profession with regard to parent-teacher relations has been
discussed extensively above. As noted, this responsibility is underscored by the identification of
‘managerial creep’ into Irish educational policy, from State levels and through to parent discourses. In
order to counteract such ‘creep’, teachers have to position themselves as policy actors, both in terms of
their re-interpretation of policy at local levels so as to resist managerialism and enact democratic
professionalism, and as active members of the Contexts of Influence and Policy Text Production at
national levels. The traditional strength of the teacher unions and the autonomy historically enjoyed by
teachers in Ireland positions them well for this role (cf. Lynch, Grummell & Devine 2012), in
comparison with teachers in many other countries, but again the increasing relevance of
managerialism can be viewed as an ominous challenge to the notion of teachers as policy actors, given
that managerialism seeks to narrow opportunities for re-interpretation and creativity in the
implementation of policy. The strength of the teacher contribution in the discourse sources analysed
reflects favourably on the activity of teachers in the Context of Influence and, indeed, in the Context
of Policy Text Production, at least in relation to parental involvement. However, Possibilities for
Partnership was critiqued as being re-active rather than pro-active regarding the emergence of
parental involvement when it was written nearly two decades ago (cf. Section 4.2.4.1). This
demonstrates the need for teachers and their representatives to address the challenge of managerialism
in a more active manner. Otherwise, by the time a reactionary response is formulated, it is likely that it
will be too late and managerialism will have taken control of educational policy-making spaces.
As the discussion of democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations in Section 2.4.3 outlined, such constructions do not provide an easy option for either teachers or parents. If they did, they would likely be much more prevalent in Irish and international education than they are. Rather democratic constructions of parent-teacher relations are emotionally demanding, complex, confusing, risky and time-consuming for parents and teachers alike. These characteristics demonstrate the appropriateness of Gallagher’s (2014) vaccine metaphor in describing the utility of democratic constructions as part of a resistance to managerial constructions, however, in that vaccination risks some discomfort in order to protect against more serious pain. It is necessary, therefore, that teachers hazard engaging with discomfiting notions of genuine parent-teacher partnership to guard against managerial versions of ‘partnership’ and, consequently, teacher professionalism, becoming dominant.

That discourse work is an essential and integral part of teacher engagement in authentic partnership with parents, and accordingly of teacher resistance to managerial constructions, was indicated by the discussion of the construction and implications of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Sections 5.3.3 and 5.4.4. The theoretical frame of the research, outlined in Section 2.6, also indicated the crucial nature of discourse work, both regarding discourse itself and the discursive nature of policy. There is a strong discursive element involved in the work of teachers and teachers’ representatives as policy actors, therefore. The legitimation and reification of democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations must be attended to in light of the Foucauldian understanding of the dialectic relationship between practice and discourse (cf. inter alia Gee 2011a, 2011b; Chiapello & Fairclough 2002). The nature of discourse itself (and particularly of democratic discourses) determines that this will not be a simple or easy process. Nonetheless, the variety of possibilities through which democratic discourses might be legitimised that were discussed in Section 5.5 suggest that there is cause for optimism with regard to the promulgation of democratic models, even when the supranational and European policy-making space in which Irish education exists is taken into account.

6.5 Overall conclusion

This research explored parental involvement at primary level in Irish education from a Foucauldian discourse theory perspective, using the discourses of teacher professionalism (traditional, managerial and democratic) as the lens through which to examine the construction of parent-teacher relations at school, national and supranational levels. The most crucial findings in relation to each of the research questions are briefly summarised below and their overall significance for Irish education considered.

6.5.1 Significance of the identified constructions of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations

A series of legitimating principles that enable and constrain the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations for Irish education were identified from the documentary discourse analysis and elite
interviews as Section 5.3 discussed. Examining the application of these principles to various parts of the education system revealed that the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations is constructed differently at school and national levels. The resulting ‘gap’ between policy and practice has important implications for teachers as policy actors.

At school levels, bottom-up teacher discourses serve to encourage an approach towards parents that is heavily influenced by traditional understandings of teacher professionalism, albeit there is a discursive acceptance of the importance of good parent-teacher relations for the education of the individual child. At national levels, many of the groups active in the Context of Influence at this level describe the ideal parent-teacher relationship in ways that demonstrate the influence of democratic understandings of teacher professionalism. There is evidence of parents, teachers and other stakeholders working together in democratic ways in the Contexts of Influence and of Policy Text Production. This traditional/democratic inter-discursivity occurs within the broader context of managerial discourses that are dominant in European and supra-national spheres and increasingly present within DES approaches to educational policy-making. Given how managerialism can recontextualise the language of democracy and partnership to achieve its own ends, the inference of managerial discourse strands, particularly in DES discourse sources, was treated as highly significant in the research. It indicates the possibility that ideals of democratic discourses (such as parental involvement) are being used as ‘masquerades’ to achieve managerial objectives. This calls for a critical re-evaluation of the increasing inclusion of parent representatives in national decision-making structures by the DES, as a deliberate strategy by the DES to use the discursively powerful nature of the parent voice to achieve greater control over the Context of Influence. Hence, the identified traditional/democratic Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations may be in the process of being subverted into a traditional/managerial one.

With regard to the significance of these constructions, the most obvious is the disparity between the bottom-up traditional discourses that construct practices towards parents, and the top-down democratic discourses that shape educational policies about parental involvement. This gulf between practice and policy has allowed the survival in schools of traditional approaches to parents. The gap between policy and practice is problematic for policy-makers in terms of policy implementation, as well as providing an excellent example of how the discursive nature of policy processes constrain the power of the Context of Policy Text Production in the Context of Practice. In the case of genuinely democratic top-down discourses, this can be regarded as unfortunate for Irish education, as it has hampered the development of authentic partnership between parents and teachers. The gap between policy and practice has also, however, served to protect Irish schools and teachers from the managerial influences that have ‘crept’ into Irish educational policy-making over the past two decades. Teachers have been able to re-contextualise, resist, or ignore aspects of the managerial agenda that contradicted their own dominant discourses, and so have exercised power as policy actors. If, however, a managerially influenced DES achieves greater control over the Context of Influence
through pushing the ‘truth’ of shared interests between the parents and the State, the role of the teacher as policy actor in the Context of Practice is likely to be greatly reduced. The discussion in Section 4.3.3.2 of the ways in which Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life narrows the options for teachers and parents at school level provides a relevant, if mild, example of the erosion of the space for policy response. Hence, it is essential that teachers engage as policy actors to challenge managerial constructs before such erosion of their policy-making potential is accomplished.

6.5.2 Crucial nature of the ‘truth’ of shared interests among parents, teachers and the State

The ‘truths’, norms and power relations, in the Foucauldian sense, that are constructed by, and constructive of, the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations were examined in Section 5.4. While, as discussed, all of the discursive truths are insightful and significant, in light of the extended reach of managerialism outlined above and the use of parent voice in that process, the crucial nature of the ‘truth’ of shared interests between parents and teachers for the education system as a whole is apparent.

The different assumptions implied by the understanding that parents and teachers are aligned in the best interests of their shared responsibilities to children, or the alternative understanding that parents and the State are aligned to ensure that teachers deliver quality education, draws attention to the importance of the discursive underpinnings of policy. Regardless of which perspective is dominant at various levels of the education system, it is evident from the research findings that parents are now positioned in a very central position in the Context of Influence and as discourse producers. While the research revealed that parents’ representatives have been supported by other educational stakeholders in obtaining that place, (most notably by teacher unions and the DES) often to the benefit of those stakeholders, nonetheless, the NPC-P has made considerable efforts itself to retain and prove itself worthy of that position. Accordingly, capturing the support of parents’ representatives is an important challenge for educational stakeholders as a means of increasing that stakeholder’s ability to influence discourse and policy production. Since the research indicated that the DES have been very successful in capturing the support of parents recently, teachers (at school level) and teacher unions (at national level) are tasked with increasing parent support for their position(s). It would, however, be inherently undemocratic to try achieve this support through the manipulative means often associated with managerialism. Rather, the thesis posits that the most successful way to do this in the long-term involves teachers building new forms of open, inclusive and professionally enhancing relationships with parents, in accordance with the requirements of activist professionalism. While this is an issue for national levels, it is perhaps even more important at school levels, given that good relationships do seem to exist between the various representative bodies at national level, whereas school level relationships are more problematic and frustrating, particularly from parent perspectives.

While many of the prevailing legitimating principles and truths of the existing Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations provide a basis for these new forms of relationship between parents and
teachers, thereby allowing for a helpful inter-discursivity, nonetheless, new relationships will require a change in norms and power relations. ‘Good teachers’, as Hargreaves (2000:175/6) described: ‘must open themselves up to and become more publicly vulnerable and accessible’. Paradoxically by sharing power and knowledge with parents, teachers protect themselves from the powerlessness and de-professionalising consequences of the managerial professional agenda.

Since such activist professionalism should be as effective in achieving the education quality concerns of the State as the State’s managerial approach, albeit through very different strategies, it opens the possibility in the long-term of a new ‘truth’ of the shared interests of teachers, parents and the State underpinning democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations, teacher professionalism, and education more generally.

6.5.3 Recontextualisation of discourse as a crucial part of teachers’ discursive work

Legitimation strategies through which democratic discourses might be legitimised so as to become reified and dominant in Irish education were considered in Section 5.5. All of the strategies discussed are potentially useful and, indeed, need to be employed in combination, given the entangled nature of discourse and discourse work. In light of the colonising potential of managerialism, and the continued dominance of traditional approaches at school level, recontextualisation is a particularly pertinent strategy of legitimation, however.

In terms of the analysis of ‘managerial creep’ provided above, it is contended that a major task for teachers and their representatives involves the ‘re-recontextualisation’ of democratic discourses in the policy-making spaces. It is argued that democratic discourses of parent-teacher relations have been ‘stolen’, at least to an extent at national policy-making levels so as to achieve managerial objectives. Teachers, therefore, need to re-claim these democratic discourses on behalf of genuine parent-teacher partnerships, both at national level and at school levels. Furthermore, as a profession and as individuals, teachers need to ensure that they retain the capacity and willingness to re-interpret top-down policy requirements to suit activist professional considerations.

‘Re-recontextualisation’ is also necessary with regard to the appropriation of democratic strands by traditional discourses, as the example of parent involvement in fundraising being used as a proxy for ‘partnership’ demonstrates. Activist professional teachers need to be willing to translate bottom-up traditional discourse strands into democratic school cultures so as to allow the development of authentic partnership between parents and teachers. As serious and challenging as responding to the threat of managerialism is, the difficulty for teachers in moving away from the familiarity and comfort of traditional discourses should not be under-estimated either, as was discussed in Section 5.5.1.3 regarding the legitimating authority of conformity. This difficulty is made all the more problematic by the understanding that traditional approaches offer a ‘safe’ alternative to managerialism. However, the frustration of parents with regard to their involvement at school levels, as a result of the continuing dominance of traditional constructions, makes it all the more likely that they will be interpellated by
the managerial discourses that appear to offer them a much more powerful position in schools. Hence, the above analysis indicates that the ‘opting-out’ with regard to parental involvement inherent in traditional constructions, far from being safe, is actually very dangerous for teacher professionalism, in that it allows managerial constructs the space to develop and strengthen. In Hargreaves’ (2000:175) words teachers have to ‘move towards the danger here, rather than closet themselves away’.

6.5.4. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this thesis argues that while teachers at school levels still adopt a broadly traditional approach to parent-teacher relations, democratic approaches to parental involvement are more prevalent at national level. Examples of democratic relationships between educational stakeholders were found during the research, and many policy documents produced at this level advance democratic principles. This can be read as an example of the limitations of the Context of Policy Text Production in determining action in the Context of Practice. It indicates the continuing power and autonomy of teachers to dictate practice at school levels, regardless of what policy texts demand. It thereby reveals the central importance of the role of the teacher in the development of parent-teacher relations.

The traditional/democratic and practice/policy divide is complicated, however, by the finding that the managerialism dominant at supra-national and European levels is exerting an increasing pressure on Ireland, most apparent in DES policy. Given that the central position of parent representatives at national levels owes much to DES interventions, this raises the possibility that democracy at that level is acting as a ‘masquerade’ for managerial policy objectives. Rather than viewing the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations in Ireland as merely demonstrating a failure of policy implementation, this centres the position of the Context of Influence in the policy process. Parental involvement can be conceptualised as a policy lever, through which educational stakeholders hope to win control of the Context of Influence, and so achieve a wide endorsement of their policy ideas.

Teacher adherence to traditional approaches to parents at school level has encouraged frustrated parents to be interpellated by managerial discourses and has also allowed the DES to position itself on the side of parents. This has permitted the DES to benefit from the power of the parent voice, as represented by the NPC-P in Irish primary education. Given that the power extended to parents in managerial constructions is often a constrained form of empowerment, this is not necessarily to the advantage of parents in the long-term. Furthermore, the need perceived by the NPC-P to maintain good relations with the DES may limit its actions. Characterising the emergence of managerialism in Irish policy-making as a ‘creep’ indicates that its effects are relatively mild as yet, and teachers retain considerable power as policy actors, both due to the strength of the unions at national level and due to the autonomy and agency of teachers in the Context of Practice. However,
there is a danger that as managerial approaches strengthen and stabilise, the policy-space available to teachers will shrink.

Therefore, the understanding that parental involvement is being used as a lever to advance managerial objectives makes it a topic of extreme and urgent importance, not just for relationships between parents and teachers, but also for teacher professionalism and education processes in Ireland more generally. While this should be of concern to all stakeholders in Irish education, it is particularly relevant to teachers. Since teachers have much influence over the development of parent-teacher relations at school level, given their responsibilities to ensure a holistic and child-centred education for their pupils, and in light of the de-professionalising consequences of managerialism, teachers are charged with winning back some control over the policy lever that is parental involvement.

To do this, they need to achieve the trust and support of parents. This will be accomplished, it is argued, through teachers embracing genuinely democratic and inclusive approaches to parents. Such parent-teacher partnerships require an activist professional orientation on behalf of teachers, at individual, school and national levels. Given the essentialising nature of discourse in society and the discursive nature of policy, discourse work forms an important part of the teachers’ task, particularly in relation to re-claiming the language of democratic professionalism from managerial and traditional discourses. It is not anticipated that the creation of truly democratic parent-teacher relations will be an easy undertaking, nor will teachers alone be able to achieve it. Nonetheless, engagement with parents in democratic ways seems a good starting point from which to mount a comprehensive challenge to the managerial influences gaining ground in Irish policy-making, not least because of the ready access teachers have to parents, and the evidence that parents are being positioned as agents of the State in its advancement of managerialism. The experiences of teachers and education systems in other countries, especially England and parts of America, indicate the necessity of this challenge.

The difficulties of authentic parent-teacher partnership and, consequently, of resisting managerialism should not be under-estimated; nevertheless, much cause for optimism was found in the research. Teachers in Ireland have previously demonstrated an activist professional orientation, they still have considerable influence as policy actors, they enjoy high levels of trust from parents, and there is a discursive acceptance of the importance of democratic approaches to parents in relation to the education of their own children. That managerial objectives have to ‘masquerade’ as democratic approaches indicates the degree of resistance to managerialism that still exists within Irish education, and a genuine commitment to democratic principles can be found at national policy-making levels also. It will be crucial, however, that the attempt to subvert managerialism through democratic means begin before these advantages are eroded by the subversion of democratic approaches through managerialism. Teachers cannot afford to hide in the ostensible ‘safety’ of traditional constructions of parent-teacher relations for much longer. Rather they must engage with democratic constructions, no matter how difficult that may be, if they are to secure a healthy future for teacher professionalism.
This final chapter of the main body of the thesis is followed by a brief consideration of the lessons learned during the process of using discourse theory to explore issues of parent-teacher relations in Irish education. It is hoped that this will be helpful for future researchers.
Coda

The advantages and limitations of a research approach that involves the application of discourse theory were outlined in Chapter 4, based on the literature of discourse analysis reviewed. Since, however, discourse analysis and elite interviewing are research methods that have not been widely used in educational research, at least not in the Irish context, it seems helpful to briefly outline the particular challenges noted in the present study, and the lessons learned in seeking to overcome them. The most significant of these relate to: the practical challenges of employing tool-based discourse analysis, the importance of the quality of the discourse sources accessed, the contribution interviewing makes to reflexivity, and the difficulties involved in presenting discursive findings successfully.

Practical challenges of the tool-based approach

Devising a way of organising the many ‘tools’ of discourse analysis so that they could be usefully employed in the research posed a major practical challenge of the tool-based analytical approach. Specific difficulties were also encountered in applying the ‘gaps and silences tool’, in dealing with ‘off the record’ comments and with regard to assessing author intentionality.

Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the vast array of tools found in the literature proved initially to be very time-consuming and frustrating, not helped by the degree of overlap between many of them and the use of confusing terminology. As outlined in Section 3.3.3.1, dividing the tools into five categories based on the aspect of discourse they addressed proved useful in making the tools more accessible for the research. (See Appendix A). It also provided an order in which the tools could be employed for each document. For instance, the content tools were easiest to employ, whereas relevant aspects relating to power and operation often only became clear after multiple readings of a document. These multiple readings occurred as the tools relating to content, context and interpretation were applied. The grid format also served as a checklist, so providing for consistency and comprehensiveness in the analytical process. The need to develop a system through which to undertake the documentary analysis was an important lesson from the field, therefore. Indeed, the comprehensive referenced list of the tools of discourse analysis produced is considered a significant contribution of the study.

Some of the tools were relatively easy to apply, such as those relating to non-verbal message components or vocabulary, but others were much more difficult. The ‘gaps and silences’ tool proved particularly problematic. While it is undeniably true that the omission of certain topics from texts can be discursively significant, a major difficulty arises in trying to evaluate the degree of intention behind such omissions, especially when other concerns such as space constraints complicate matters. This dilemma was explained by Huckin (2002:352/3);
Textual silences of any type, whether speech-act, discreet, presuppositional, genre-based or manipulative, share the distinct feature of not having an overt linguistic form. This of course creates a general methodological challenge for the discourse analyst, namely, how to identify something that is absent, and how to do it in systematic fashion’.

Huckin’s (2002:348-352) ‘taxonomy of textual silences’ is helpful in trying to distinguish ‘manipulative silences’ from other kinds but, nonetheless, since evidence of intentional deception is usually indirect, the issue remains problematic. Since no wholly adequate solution was apparent, it seemed appropriate in the present research to be cautious when analysing silences or omissions, and to note the particularly speculative nature of the analysis in these cases.

Related to the issue of gaps and silences, the discourse analysis of one of the interview transcripts was particularly problematic due to the large number of ‘off the record’ statements made in it. That the interviewee perceived the need to be ‘off the record’ (despite similar comments being made by other interviewees) is very interesting from a power relations perspective, albeit might also relate to personal characteristics. Obviously these comments could not be directly discussed in the analysis, nor could the ‘gaps and silences’ tool be employed, given that they had not in fact been omitted during the interview. In light of the small sample, even a general discussion of the possible power implications was not possible, as alluding to the interviewee’s unwillingness to be quoted would involve a breach of trust. While issues relating to quotation and confidentiality are a common challenge of interviewing (cf. Goldstein 2002) the critical reading and contextual framing involved in discourse analysis complicate this further. Interestingly, this tension was not widely acknowledged in the literature of discourse analysis reviewed.

The issue of gaps and silences points to another complexity of discourse analysis; author intentionality. In general discourse analysis proceeds on the assumption that the features identified in a text as being of discursive importance have been deliberately and intentionally included by the author. However, this runs the risk of ignoring the possible effects of an author’s poor writing style, lack of knowledge, or haste. Admittedly these concerns might be less relevant in officially produced policy documents, where careful consideration and consultation can be assumed to have taken place before publication, than if analysing other forms of text. Speaker intentionality was especially relevant when analysing the interview transcripts. For example, the IPPN interviewee’s use of the word ‘curtail’ (which he then corrected) with regard to parents in school could be very significant in terms of identifying traditional approaches to parents, or could have merely been a slip of the tongue and, therefore, not significant at all. Care has to be taken when trying to gauge intentionality. Some commentators (cf. Taylor 1997; Apple 1992) have noted how discourse analysis should not involve trying to second-guess author’s intentions, but rather focus on the various interpretations that can be drawn from a text. In the present research it was decided to generally assume that the sentence structure and vocabulary of the policy documents and interviews were deliberately chosen. Attention was drawn to incidences where the interpretation of a piece of text would vary depending on how
consciously certain phrases or syntax were used by its authors. The possibility of mistakes or carelessness existing in discourse sources and altering the way the text is interpreted needs to be included in discourse work. Given that this point is ignored in most of the literature of discourse analysis reviewed, it would seem to be an important lesson arising from the present study.

**Quality of the discourse sources analysed**

Access to the discursive plane depends on the quality of discourse sources the researcher can access. Obvious difficulties emerge when there is a lack of relevant texts to analyse, but less obvious difficulties also arise when a small number of relevant texts are analysed alongside less pertinent ones.

The process of applying the tools of discourse analysis to documents and policy statements can be fascinating, given how critical reading can advance understanding. However, its success depends on the quality of the discursive sources analysed. Although parental involvement has emerged as a theme of interest in education in recent years, as the research progressed it became obvious that the documentary evidence relating to it, particularly of Irish and European origin, remains relatively sparse when compared with other topics. It proved difficult to apply some of the tools of discourse analysis in relation to parental involvement with confidence to documents that did not have parental involvement as a main theme. The consequences of this are particularly apparent when the issue of European influences on Irish parent-teacher relations is considered. This difficulty of accessing the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations was ameliorated to some degree by supplementing the documentary data with elite interviews. Where an inference was made based on limited material such as a single sentence or phrase, this, and the possible weakness of the inference as a result, was noted in the research findings.

In the case where discourse sources are generally limited, challenges also emerge in relation to detailed discourse sources. For instance, in contrast to many of the texts analysed, ‘Possibilities for Partnership’ (INTO 1997) and ‘Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners’ (NCCA 2009) were rewarding documents from a discourse analysis perspective, given their in-depth treatment of the topic being researched. This introduced concerns about balance, given that those documents were mentioned more in the discussion of the research findings than the documents of other organisations that pay less attention to parental involvement. There was also more scope to critically analyse the statements in the more relevant texts, which raised issues of fairness. It can, however, be argued that in light of the uneven way in which individuals and organisations are able to exercise influence over the discourse, the sense of imbalance arising from relying on certain documents more than others is merely reflecting the discursive plane rather than being a limitation of the research.

While it is possible to overcome some of the difficulties created by limited discourse sources, (e.g. through elite interviewing) it is advisable to select research topics to explore through discourse analysis carefully, as some are likely to be more suited to this methodology than others.
Interviewing and reflexivity

Aside from its utility as a supplementary method of data collection, the elite interviewing stage of the research proved useful in encouraging researcher reflexivity, which is a particularly important concern of discourse analysis approaches. In preparing for the interviews and in explaining the research to the participants the researcher had to consider how she and the study were perceived by others. This helped in the reflexive process of ‘othering’ the gaze of the researcher (cf. Foley 2001:473). The introduction of perspectives other than those of the researcher also helped her to gain a greater awareness of her own subjectivity and its influence on the research. For example, as the research progressed the researcher became accustomed to examining parent-teacher relations in terms of the three identified discourses of teacher professionalism, and so the response of the elite interviewees to this contention was a useful reminder that others do not conceptualise parent-teacher relations in this manner. Often the most useful conversations from a reflective perspective occurred after the formal interview had concluded and both interviewee and interviewer were more at ease in discussing the study generally. While this should not be taken to suggest that interviews are an essential part of a discourse analysis process, it does point to the need for the discourse analyst to discuss their work with interested others, given the lack of personal interaction that is a feature of documentary discourse research. Even brief conversations can raise issues that assist the researcher in identifying the effects of their own subjectivity.

Presentation of findings

Rogers (2011: xviii) noted that the representation of research findings is an issue often overlooked in the literature of critical discourse analysis. This contention was borne out in the present study, where managing the word-count, devising a logical structure through which to present the findings, and moving from identification of discursive features to a deeper contextual analysis posed particular challenges, about which much of the literature was unhelpful.

The length of the accounts produced during the discourse analysis posed a major difficulty during the research. Due to the somewhat novel and contested nature of the research approach, it was necessary to explain the methodology in detail, detail that would not be necessary if a more conventional research approach was being employed. Similarly, due to the many criticisms on the grounds of subjectivity and lack of rigour that have been levelled against discourse analysis, it initially seemed necessary to provide many examples from the discourse sources in order to support the analysis. The complicated and interwoven nature of discourse also created a need for much description and explanation. This unfortunately resulted in very long and unwieldy drafts. Much effort was expended in trying to reduce the length of these, while at the same time retaining all the crucial elements. This was a very frustrating experience and was, in the opinion of the researcher, one of the most challenging aspects of using discourse analysis in the present study. Interestingly, it was not mentioned as a problem in most of the literature of discourse theory reviewed. The importance of
focussing the research questions very precisely and accordingly limiting the discourse sources analysed emerges from this as a related lesson from the field.

Another challenge was presented in trying to devise a logical and clear framework through which to present the findings of the research. It proved very difficult to identify a method of presenting the entangled mass of discourse strands that was both comprehensive and succinct. Using a thematic approach while treating each discourse in turn, and discussing the relevant documents and interview data in succession within that context seemed the best way to overcome this difficulty. The hazard with this is that by presenting discourse in a linear and organised manner, it may minimise one of the key affordances of discourse work, which is acknowledging the complex and fluid nature of discourse. It also may hide some of the richness of the tool-based approach to data. However, given that a coherent presentation arrangement is required and since no structure is likely to be problem-free, it seemed sensible to prioritise clarity and consistency, while also drawing attention to the simplification necessary for explanatory purposes.

One of the most difficult issues that emerged during the research related to using discourse theory to explain the findings of the discourse analysis at a deeper level than merely ‘spotting examples’ of various discourse strands. Again this problem was flagged by Rogers (2011: xviii) who commented on the challenge of balancing ‘zooming-in’ and ‘zooming-out’, so that the analysis is adequately fine grained, and yet makes sense to the reader. The fragmented nature of the discursive plane of parent-teacher relations made this challenge all the greater, in that there was not an easily identifiable dominant or counter discourse stretching across it. Using the key aspects of Foucault’s discourse theory as sub-headings under which to discuss cross-cuts of the Discourse of Parent-Teacher Relations (eventually) offered a solution to this difficulty, albeit that the convoluted and complicated nature of the Discourse, particularly when managerial discourses were considered, meant that it remained a challenge to adequately explain it. It is a limitation of the literature of discourse analysis, however, that few researchers address the complexity of moving from the practicalities of implementing discourse analysis to using the resulting research findings as a basis for deep analysis.

Conclusion

As outlined in Section 3.3.6, discourse analysis has much to offer educational research, and it is heartening that its usefulness as a research approach is being more widely recognised (cf. Rogers 2011). Arguably, however, there is much work to be done in making discourse analysis accessible to the novice researcher across the social sciences generally. Much of the existing literature on the topic can be criticised for its incongruous lack of agreed definitions and terminology, an unnecessary concern with delineating disciplinary boundaries, and the omission from consideration the practical aspects of undertaking discursive work. This is not to deny some of the very useful work that was accessed during the present study including, for instance, inter alia Hyatt (2005), Gee (2011b), Wodak and Krzyzanowski (2008) and Rogers (2011). Nonetheless, attending to the readability of the literature
of discourse analysis would seem to be an important aspect of disseminating discourse analysis approaches more widely. It is hoped that the present study paid adequate attention to such issues.
List of references


List of references


List of references


List of references


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List of references


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List of references


List of references


Appendix A: Framework for engaging with the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Operation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Non-verbal message components</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mautner 2008:30</td>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hyatt 2010:14</td>
<td>Layout e.g. coloured boxes, bullet points</td>
<td>Fairclough 2001:259</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Vocabulary</td>
<td>Barker &amp; Rossi 2011:148, Gee 2011:52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content words – nouns, verbs, adjectives</td>
<td>Hyatt 2010:12, Mautner 2008:38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Function words – pronouns, Hyatt 2010:11, Winton 2013:165</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Connotations- evoked evaluation, terms that appear neutral but aren’t really</td>
<td>Hyatt 2013:9</td>
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<tr>
<td>really Hyatt 2013:9</td>
<td>Collocation</td>
<td>Fairclough 2001:264</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Over-lexicalization – large number of synonymous or nearly synonymous</td>
<td>Terms</td>
<td>Theo 2000:20, Erjavec 2004:565</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Grammar</td>
<td>Tense and aspect Hyatt 2010:12, Hyatt</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Time &amp; Place</td>
<td>Production context</td>
<td>Reception context</td>
<td>Discourse plane/sector e.g. the media, DES etc. Jäger &amp; Maier 2009:48</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Author Claims to authority ‘I’ statements</td>
<td>Sotillo &amp; Starace Natasha 1999:428</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Stake inoculation – when people structure argument to hide their own bias, so they appear neutral</td>
<td>Wetherell 2001b:21</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Heteroglossic – traces of more than one voice</td>
<td>Maybin 2001:69</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Audience who is ideal / projected audience</td>
<td>Hyatt 2010:14</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Acceptability of the text to them</td>
<td>Wodak 2008:8</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Others present in text</td>
<td>Van De Mieroop 2005:111</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*Interpreting context, Frame problem tool</td>
<td>Gee 2011:37</td>
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<td>Internal / proximate</td>
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<td>Institutional,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Immediate context, Medium term context, Contemporary terms, structures, Epoch)</td>
<td>Hyatt 2005:522</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Situated meanings</td>
<td>Gee 2011:151</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>/ deixis tool</td>
<td>Gee 2011:8,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Fill in tool</td>
<td>Gee 2011:11</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Absence of definitions – unites audience by implying certain terms are beyond question, also allows everyone to come up with own definition (condensation symbol)</td>
<td>Winton 2013:165</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Interpretative repertoire</td>
<td>Edley 2001:202</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discursive background of reader</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Figured world of reader</td>
<td>Gee 2011:168</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collective symbols cultural stereotypes</td>
<td>Jäger &amp; Maier 2009:47</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Subject positions</td>
<td>Edley 2001:202</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpellation – being called by a particular discourse</td>
<td>Edley 2001:209</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Discourse position</td>
<td>Jäger &amp; Maier 2009:49</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>/ Identity</td>
<td>Taylor 2001:17</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*Making strange tool</td>
<td>Gee 2011:11</td>
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<td>*Legitimation of policy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Modes of legitimation –</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Authorisation, Rationalisation, Moral evaluation, Mythopoesis</td>
<td>Van Leeuwen 2007</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Van Leeuwen 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Positioning of social actors - I/we, ordinary people, powers that be, not we/I</td>
<td>Reisigl 2008:99</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Privileging, Marginalising</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Valourising, Source attribution, direct quotes, presence of different voices</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mautner 2008:44</td>
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<td>*Positioning of information / voice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Foregrounding Prominence of topics</td>
<td>Lamb 2013:350</td>
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<td>Backgrounding</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*Agency</td>
<td>Activation, Hyatt 2010:11, van Leeuwen 2009:156</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transitivity Mautner 2008:41-44, Teo 2000:27</td>
<td>/ Transitivity Fairclough 2001:261</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Power/Knowledge What ‘truths’ are created by this text? Foucault 1980, Carabine 2001:275</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Building Tasks</td>
<td>Significance building Gee 2011:92</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Activities building Gee 2011:96,59</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identities building Gee 2011:106</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships building Gee 2011:114</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Politics building Gee 2011:118</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Connections building Gee 2011:126</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Signs, systems and knowledge building Gee 2011:135</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Subject positions</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Subjectification – produced by and subject to discourse Foucault 1980, Hall 2001:79</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Why this way and not another way? Gee 2011:54</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Effects of the text, effects of the discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Doing and not just saying Gee 2011:45</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Overall conclusions as to what contribution this text is making, what it is doing re the issues in question</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ellipsis, conjunctions</th>
<th>Wodak 2008:8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic flow/chaining - coherence</strong></td>
<td>Mautner 2008:44, Wodak 2008:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetorical questions</strong></td>
<td>Hyatt 2010:13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative interrogatives</td>
<td>Hyatt 2005:524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common sense</td>
<td>‘We’,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeals to authority/ mass support</td>
<td>Prentice 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generalisations</strong></td>
<td>Teo 2000:16, Prentice 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non sequitur - conclusion, even if correct, doesn’t follow from argument made</td>
<td>Prentice 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetoric – Invention (supporting arguments – appealing to reason/logos, emotion/pathos or character/ethos), Disposition (organisation), Style (words, metaphors, conventions etc), Memory (shared cultural memories), Delivery (dissemination of message)</strong></td>
<td>these probably overlap with others. Winston 2013:160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barker &amp; Rossi 2011:148</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem it addresses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exigence – problem to which policy responds, constructed by the policy itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Discursive events</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newsworthiness, Why selected for da – typical, atypical etc</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Contextualisation of policy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy drivers, levers, steering, trajectories</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrant (the justification for developing the policy/stance) – evidentiary warrant, accountability warrant, political warrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>De-construction of policy</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix B: Sample of initial recording grid for critical reading

### Document:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non verbal message components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive modifiers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modality (High, low, unmodalized declaratives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connotations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-lexicalisation</td>
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<td>Stanza tool</td>
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<td>Non sequitur</td>
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Appendix C

Appendix C: List of policy documents analysed

**Irish sources:**


*Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life.* Department of Education, 2011.


**European sources:**


**Supra-national sources:**


Appendix D: Account of elite interviews undertaken
The elite interviews took place between late April of 2013 and May 2014, at dates, times and venues convenient for the interviewees. All were recorded and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interview. The transcripts were sent back to the interviewees for their approval or additional comments if necessary. Apart from minor clarifications (e.g. names, dates) no requests were made by the interviewees to change the transcripts.

- Interview with Senior Official from Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, Friday April 26th, 2013, at INTO Headquarters, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin. Formerly a primary school teacher and principal, this interviewee had been actively involved in the preparation and publication of *Possibilities for Partnership*. Recorded duration: 61 minutes.

- Interview with Senior Official from Irish Primary Principals’ Network, Thursday, December 5th, 2013. This interviewee, a school principal, was actively involved in writing *Supporting Each Other* along with representatives of the NPC-P. Recorded duration: 36 minutes.

- Interview with Senior Official from National Parents’ Council- Primary, Wednesday, December 11th, 2013 at NPC offices, 12 Marlborough Court, Dublin. The interviewee described the central nature of her role in the NPC-P as: ‘If I’m not attending something then we’re generally not attending’, and she was named by many of the other interviewees when they referred to the work of the NPC-P. Recorded duration: 48 minutes.

- Interview with Educational Consultant, Wednesday, February 12th, 2014, at House of Fraser Café, Dundrum Shopping Centre, Dublin. The interviewee had been very actively involved in the NPC-P in its early years, and she was named by many of the other interviewees as a very influential person in terms of parental involvement in Ireland. Recorded duration: 56 minutes.

- Interview with Senior Official from Educate Together, Thursday, March 6th, 2014, at Educate Together HQ, 10-12 Hogan Place, Dublin. This interviewee is among those who negotiate with the DES on behalf of the *Educate Together* movement. Recorded duration: 52 minutes.

- Interview with Senior Inspector, Monday, April 28th, 2014 at Department of Education, Marlborough Street, Dublin. This interviewee was recommended by
another interviewee due to her knowledge of and interest in parental involvement in Ireland. Recorded duration: 51 minutes.


As this interview sample included representatives of teachers, parents, management bodies and the DES, as well as the perspectives provided by the Education Consultant and the NCCA representative, it was deemed satisfactory in terms of accessing the insights of key policy actors.

The researcher attended the NPC-P national conference on Saturday June 14th 2014, where the then Education Minister, Ruairí Quinn, spoke. Harold Hislop’s speech from the previous NPC-P Conference in June 2013 was transcribed from a video recording. The researcher attended the INTO’s Consultative Conferences in Education in 2014 (*Quality in Education*, Armagh City Hotel, 14th/15th November) and 2010 (*Learning Communities*, Silver Springs Hotel, Cork, 19th/20th November). She also attended a number of the public lectures organised by the Vere Foster Trust and the Institute of Educational Research in Ireland, and the Educational Studies Association of Ireland national conferences in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013. These events provided additional sources of current Irish educational discourse.
Appendix E

Appendix E: Information sheet for research participants

Researcher: Brigid Bennett, PhD student, Primary teacher  bennettbrigid@gmail.com
Supervisor: Dr Conor Galvin, School of Education, UCD

Topic and Title of research: Discursive constructions of parent teacher relations in Irish primary schools.
This study aims to identify and examine the discourses present in Irish education, in relation to teacher professionalism and consequently parent teacher relations, as apparent in the policies and practices of parental involvement in schools. It aims to identify and examine the assumptions and implications of these discourses, their origins and transmission and what they achieve in relation to parental involvement and parent teacher relations in Irish schools.

Methodology:
The major methodological approach of the research involves discourse analysis of the policies, opinions and statements of influential bodies in Irish education regarding parental involvement and parent teacher relations. This comprises two main data collection stages: a critical reading of relevant documents from Irish, European and international sources, and interviews with key individuals in those organisations that are influential in discourse construction and maintenance.

Data usage:
Data obtained during the interview stage of the research will be used to supplement and clarify that obtained from the documentary analysis stage, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of the discourses of parent teacher relations that are present in Irish educational policy and practice.

Research participation:
Participation in the interview stage of the research involves the interviewee discussing their organisation’s perspective on parental involvement/parent teacher relations in Irish education with the researcher, with specific reference to documents on the topic published by their organisation, if applicable.
Issues of timing, venue etc. will be arranged individually to suit each research participant.

Confidentiality:
Research participants have been selected on the basis of their familiarity with the policy positions and texts of particular organisations. In order to analysis each organisation’s perspective and policy it will not be possible to guarantee total anonymity. However, interviewees will not be referred to by name or specific job title, rather reference will be made to ‘xxxx member’ (or similar wording) in the research.
With the permission of each interviewee it is hoped to use audio recording of the interviews to ease the process of creating interview transcripts. These recordings will not be made available to third parties unconnected with the research, and will be destroyed once they are no longer required for verification purposes.

**Further information:**
Should you wish to obtain further information on this study please contact Brigid at bennettbrigid@gmail.com

**Declaration:**
I have read this information sheet and have had time to consider whether to take part in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. I agree to take part in this research.

Do you agree to allow an audio recording be made during the interview? _____________

Signature: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix F: Conversation prompts for elite interviews

General discussion regarding parental involvement/parent teacher relations

➢ Ask about the interviewee’s opinion of the most important issues in Irish education today. Where does parental involvement/parent-teacher relations fit in the list of perceived priorities?
➢ (Perception of parental involvement/parent-teacher relations) What is happening regarding parental involvement/parent-teacher relations in Irish education at the present time? What has changed/stayed the same since the interviewee became involved in ……? What is the interviewee’s opinion of that? - what’s working/not working? Where are the challenges at national/school/individual levels?
➢ (Type/tone of parental involvement/parent-teacher relationships) Could the interviewee describe their/their organisation’s ideals regarding parental involvement/parent-teacher relations? Draw attention again to national/school/individual levels.
➢ (Justification of parental involvement/parent-teacher relations) If parental involvement/parent-teacher relations are in the priority list, then why does the interviewee think they matter? If not, why do they think they don’t matter that much?
➢ (School and community) What does the term school community mean to the interviewee? Where do parents fit within that definition? What about the relationship between school and local community – where does the school fit? What is the interviewee’s opinion of that?
➢ (Power) Who exercises power in Irish education at national/school/individual levels at the present time? What is the interviewee’s opinion about that? Do they have any suggestions about what, if anything, needs to be changed in relation to the exercise of power?
➢ (Implementation) How would the interviewee go about increasing/changing parental involvement/parent-teacher relations? What advice would they offer teachers/parents/others interested in changing these?

Discussion of the specific document (general points)

➢ (Purposes) Why was the document written? Was there any particular reason/context that made it necessary to publish it? What was the intended audience for the document? What was its contribution to Irish educational debate/practice/policy making?
➢ (Process) Who was involved in writing it? How did the process work? What/who influenced it?
➢ (Legitimacy) Is the document still relevant? Does the interviewee think it is a fair representation of the organisation’s views? Does it have any particular weaknesses?