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Supporting Parents  
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# Parental Involvement, Engagement and Partnership in their Children's Education during the Primary School Years

Leah O'Toole, Joan Kiely, Deirdre McGillacuddy,  
Emma Zara O'Brien and Cliona O'Keeffe



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## List of Abbreviations

<b>ABC</b>	Area-Based Childhood Programme
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
<b>DCYA</b>	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
<b>GUI</b>	<i>Growing up in Ireland</i> study
<b>IEP</b>	Individual Education Plan
<b>IPPN</b>	Irish Primary Principals' Network
<b>HSCL</b>	Home School Community Liaison
<b>NCCA</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>NNPS</b>	National Network of Partnership Schools
<b>NPC</b>	National Parents Council Primary
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Needs

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# Introduction

In recent years, educational research has highlighted the importance of understanding children's learning as embedded in the social, cultural and family contexts in which it occurs (Alanen, Brooker and Mayell, 2015). This has led to an increasing focus on the role of parents and the 'home learning environment', and many studies have identified the profound influence these may have on children's learning and development both within and beyond formal educational settings (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017). Extensive international research shows that children do better when their parents are actively involved with their education (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012; Desforges and Aboucaar, 2003; Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2008). Thus, designing learning environments to maximise opportunities for bridging communication between children's home and school may be a significant factor in children's educational outcomes (Hayes et al., 2017).

However, it is important to theorise explorations of home learning environment and the role of parents in children's learning, as otherwise there is the risk of viewing certain homes, parents and children through a deficit lens, and misconstruing seeming disengagement as disinterest (Brooker, 2015). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) can provide an appropriate conceptual framework through which to interpret processes of parental involvement, engagement and partnership (O'Toole, 2017). The current literature review was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the National Parents Council Primary (NPC) to examine parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their children's education in the primary years. It draws on a range of national and international research, analysed through a bioecological lens, to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the features of good parent-school partnerships during the primary school years focusing, in particular, on supporting *all* children's learning?
  - What types of parental engagement make a difference to children's educational outcomes during their primary school years?
  - How do parents actively contribute to good parent-school partnerships?
  - How do schools actively contribute to these good parent-school partnerships?
  - What strategies are particularly effective in enhancing partnerships between parents and schools and, in particular, what strategies work best where extra support may be needed, for example, for children with special educational needs, children from disadvantaged communities, children with English as an additional language, children from ethnic minorities?
2. What role does homework play, if any, in helping parents to engage with their children's learning during the primary school years?
3. What are the key implications for:
  - Curriculum development?
  - For those working with parents in support roles?

Extensive international research shows that children do better when their parents are actively involved with their education

(Borgonovi and Montt, 2012; Desforges and Aboucaar, 2003; Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2008)

# Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development: An Introduction

Bronfenbrenner (1979) is best known for his ecological model of child development, which allows consideration of a child's world on a number of levels (micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems) but Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) refer to the model as "an evolving theoretical system" (p. 793). The current research embeds the understanding of parental involvement, engagement and partnership within the most up-to-date version, the 'bioecological' model, incorporating biological components and temporal concerns (Bronfenbrenner 1993; 1994; 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; 2006). This is important to note, since much work that identifies itself as located within a 'bioecological' perspective actually often relies on the more well-known but less dynamic 'ecological' model from 1979 (Hayes et al., 2017).

According to Hayes et al. (2017), the bioecological model was in a continual state of development, up until Bronfenbrenner's death in 2005. The most complete version was published by Bronfenbrenner and Morris posthumously in 2006 (a re-working of their 1998 chapter), although it should be noted that even this was considered by the authors to be a 'work in progress'. This model operates through a multi-layered approach, at the centre of which is the child, viewed by Bronfenbrenner as an active agent in his or her own world. The personality traits, temperament, motivations, genetic inheritance, and dispositions of the child influence and are in turn influenced by the other levels of the bioecological system. The model identifies four key

elements to be used both in understanding child learning and development, and in structuring research on it: Process, Person, Context and Time (PPCT). Within this approach, each element must be examined individually and in terms of their interaction (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

## **PROCESS-PERSON-CONTEXT-TIME (PPCT)**

Regarding 'process', one of the central principles of the bioecological model is that children develop through the relationships they experience. Bronfenbrenner refers to these important relationships as 'proximal processes': "Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620). These interactions, it is thought, must occur regularly over time in order to be effective.

Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment

(Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620)



Developmentally effective 'proximal processes', it is posited, are not unidirectional. In the case of interpersonal interaction, this means that initiatives should not come from just one side, but there should be 'reciprocity of exchange' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). This concept may support understanding of parental involvement, engagement and partnership in children's education, since much of the research literature on this topic emphasises the crucial role of relationships, both between children and adults, and between teachers and parents (O'Toole, 2017). Viewing parental involvement through the conceptual lens of proximal processes may help to identify factors that support or hinder good home-school relationships (O'Toole, 2016; 2017).

Regarding 'person' factors, in the bioecological model, the individual is not viewed as a passive recipient of experiences within settings and 'processes'. The idea of a passively adapting child was sometimes invoked to critique the original ecological model (Santrock, 2011), and one of the driving forces leading Bronfenbrenner to write his 1989 chapter "re-assessing, revising, and extending – as well as regretting and even renouncing – some of the conceptions set forth in my 1979 monograph" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 187) was the clarification that the child is an active participant in his or her own development (Hayes et al., 2017). The biopsychological characteristics of the individual influence both sides of the equation; they are at once the product of prior developmental processes, and the partial producers of the person's future developmental course (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). Thus, the characteristics of the 'person' actually appear twice in the bioecological model - first as one of the components influencing the form, power, content and direction of 'proximal processes', and then

... it is perhaps the identification of the importance of 'context' that is one of its most important contributions to educational theory, research and practice, through its concepts of the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems (Downes, 2014)

again as 'developmental outcomes'. This can help to explain the influence of individual factors such as expectations and prior experiences of education, linguistic and ethnic background, socio-economic status, etc, on the processes of parental involvement, engagement and partnership (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), allowing researchers to explore these issues without reverting to deficit models that may misconstrue lack of engagement as lack of interest (O'Toole, 2016).

With reference to 'context', the bioecological model as a conceptual framework for the current research provides the necessity to investigate which environmental conditions facilitate or hinder parental involvement and engagement. While later versions of the bioecological model place much stronger emphasis on other aspects, in particular 'process' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), it is perhaps the identification of the importance of 'context' that is one of its most important contributions to educational theory, research and practice, through its concepts of the micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems (Downes, 2014).

The 'micro-system' refers to the level of which the individual person has direct experience on a regular basis, e.g. school, home, etc. This is the level on which psychology has traditionally focused without,

Bronfenbrenner argues, due regard to other environmental influences on both the system and the child therein. The bioecological model describes the micro-system as:

A pattern of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.1645)

Some 'person' characteristics are also included in the definition of the micro-system, in the characteristics of parents, relatives, close friends, teachers, or any others who participate in the life of the developing person on a regular basis over time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). This shows the importance of understanding the nature of individual school and home micro-systems when exploring parental involvement and engagement with children's education (O'Toole, 2017), and highlights the dynamic, mutually interacting nature of the four elements of the PPCT model (Hayes et al., 2017).

For example, Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers and Glassman (2007) outline the power of the meso-system in explaining

the problems faced by homeless youth, showing how "an individual's relationships in every setting are impacted by relationships in other settings in that individual's life. There is...a chain of activity that individuals drag with them across micro-systems" (p. 1238).

The 'meso-system' describes the level taking account of interconnections and relations between two or more settings, such as school, peer group and family, and acknowledging their impact on the individual. In short, the meso-system is a system of two or more micro-systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). This is a very powerful concept in exploring the crucial nature of parental interactions with schools and why they are so important for children. The concept elucidates how behaviour in any one setting is a function not only of experiences in that setting, but in the full range of settings experienced by the person. For example, Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers and Glassman (2007) outline the power of the meso-system in explaining the problems faced by homeless youth, showing how "an individual's relationships in every setting are impacted by relationships in other settings in that individual's life. There is... a chain of activity that individuals drag with them across micro-systems" (p. 1238). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), this happens through 'linkages' that tie various micro-systems together and encourage individuals to apply the learning from one setting to events in another. The stronger the linkages and the more consistency experienced by children in the meso-system, the easier it is for them to traverse micro-systems. Parents' interactions with schools represent the most visible and perhaps most powerful of linkages between home and school for children (O'Toole, 2017). The bioecological model emphasises that lives are lived interdependently through a network of shared relationships, or 'linked lives', and thus the meso-system provides a highly useful explanatory conceptual lens through which to view the processes of parental involvement, engagement and partnership.

The 'exo-system' consists of links between those systems of which the child has direct experience, and those settings which the child may never enter but which may nevertheless affect what happens to them. Aspects of the exo-system that are relevant to a study on parental involvement, engagement and partnership are factors like a parent's work, which can influence the availability of parents to become involved in children's education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), parent-teacher meetings and expectations for them (Hall et al, 2008), school-community links which can influence the likelihood of individual parents from certain groups to engage with schools (O'Toole, 2016), school policies on and facilities for parental involvement (INTO, 1997), etc. In other words:

The exo-system comprises the links and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 24)

This assumes a two-step causal sequence in development, whereby events in the exo-system affect the developing person's micro-system, hence influencing the person's development, but a causal sequence is also postulated to run in the other direction, whereby a person may set in motion processes in the micro-system that reverberate through other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, child factors like ability, disability or behaviour difficulties can influence the frequency and quality of home-school interaction (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; O'Toole, 2016).

This assumes a two-step causal sequence in development, whereby events in the exo-system affect the developing person's micro-system, hence influencing the person's development, but a causal sequence is also postulated to run in the other direction, whereby a person may set in motion processes in the micro-system that reverberate through other systems

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

The 'macro-system' consists of the wider pattern of ideology and organisation of social institutions common to a particular social class or culture to which a person belongs, such as patterns of racism, cultural norms, etc. It refers to similarities within a given culture or subculture in the form and content of its constituent micro-, meso- and exo-systems, as well as any belief systems underlying such similarities. Cultures and subcultures can be expected to be different from each other, but relatively homogenous internally (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is important to understand when studying parental involvement and engagement, because individual parents can experience different pressures, norms, prejudices and expectations based on factors like gender, social class, language, ethnicity, religion, etc, and these can have enormous influence on levels and quality of engagement with schools (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Kiely, 2017; O'Toole, 2016; 2017).

The most recent addition to the model is the 'chrono-system', and this constitutes the 'time' element of the model. This refers to the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life-course of the person (Bronfenbrenner 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; 2006). In effect, this recognises that experiences and reactions to experience often change over time. For example, parents' involvement, engagement and partnership with educational settings tends to decrease as their children progress through the educational system, with involvement at its highest in early years settings and primary level, but decreasing on entry to the secondary school system (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; O'Toole, 2016). Harris and Robinson (2016) also found that the benefits of parental involvement in education were strongest for younger children. The chrono-system also considers the effect of socio-historical conditions on the development of the person. For example, parents are more likely to expect involvement with their children's education now than they may have been in the past (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and there is a move towards greater parental involvement in educational policy internationally (Robinson and Harris, 2014). Thus, "the life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and events they experience over their life-time" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998, p.1020).

Drawing together the elements of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' as the bioecological model does makes it imperative that complex phenomena like parental involvement and engagement are understood in both cross-cultural contexts, that is in terms of similarities and variations across cultures and subcultures, and in historical context, that is in terms of similarities and variations over time. Looking at each of the elements of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' as a system means

recognising that no cog in the system moves in isolation and that actions in any one part of the system affect all the other parts. Indirect effects of 'person', 'context' and 'time' on 'proximal processes' are seen as 'more than the sum of their parts' rather than simply additive. This yields an impressively fluid, dynamic model built on "bidirectional, synergistic interrelationships" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 799) that allows us to begin to unravel the complexity of factors involved in parental involvement and engagement. As Downes' (2014) contends "intervention models that 'work' causally have hidden necessary conditions in the system of relations without which the more obvious causal elements could not have occurred" (p. 36). The bioecological model can help researchers, practitioners and policy makers to make these hidden conditions and relationships more explicit, to allow clearer understanding of what works and why with regards to parental involvement, engagement and partnership.

The analysis to follow presents an understanding of parental involvement and engagement in their children's education through a bioecological lens. Specifically, following an initial introduction to key findings, debates and tensions from the literature on parental involvement, the bioecological research structure of Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) is used to highlight important issues for the development of parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their children's education.

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# The role of parents in education

The importance of parental involvement and engagement is so well established that it stands as one of the most agreed-upon principles of good educational practice (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012; Desforges and Aboucaar, 2003; Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2012; Gileece, 2015; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2008; Johnson, Arevalo, Cates, Weisleder, Dreyer and Mendelsohn, 2016; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; O'Toole, 2017; Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu and Yuan, 2017). For instance, the literature draws strong links between parental involvement and improved behaviour and mental health of children (Gileece, 2015; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Behavioural outcomes may in some part be related to improved self-regulation in children whose parents are involved in their education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), and research has also indicated that parental involvement promotes positive academic outcomes (Hart, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Kim and Hill, 2015).

Numerous studies have identified parental involvement as one of the key variables associated with school effectiveness generally and pupil attainment in particular (Flouri, 2006; Flouri and Buchanan, 2004; INTO, 1997; Ma et al., 2017). Furthermore, parent-child interactions, especially when they are warm, responsive and interesting to the child, influence a child's academic development (Christian, Morrison and Bryant, 1998). In the Irish context, Kavanagh, Shiels, Gileece and Kiniry (2015) identified "strong associations between pupils' home and family lives and their reading and mathematics achievement" (p. xxiii), and studies have shown that

...studies have shown that parental involvement in their child's education has a greater impact on the child's learning than variables such as social class, level of parental education or parental income

(Jackson and Harbison, 2014)

parental involvement in their child's education has a greater impact on the child's learning than variables such as social class, level of parental education or parental income (Jackson and Harbison, 2014). Doctoroff and Arnold's (2017) study confirmed the connection between good parent-child relationships and school success. It highlighted the need to support parents in developing their understanding of how to nurture children's engagement in learning and in particular to support children who find it difficult to acquire academic skills.

The effectiveness of parental involvement may perhaps be influenced by the link between family engagement and improved student attendance (Sheldon 2007; Sheldon and Jung, 2015), because student attendance is a leading indicator of learning (Epstein and Sheldon, 2016). Also relevant are positive dispositions and attitudes towards education fostered through vicarious learning (Hart, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), the development of learning processes and self-awareness on behalf of children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001) and



...better school behaviour  
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thereby to higher likelihood  
of educational success

(Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001)

the positive effect of parental involvement on children's motivation (Jaynes and Wlodowski, 1990). Many of these outcomes are mutually reinforcing. For example, better school behaviour is logically linked to greater in-class attention and thereby to higher likelihood of educational success (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues suggest that these positive effects are achieved through parental modelling and reinforcement, and instruction of appropriate skills, knowledge and behaviours associated with successful school performance (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995). Hartas (2008) indicates that "Parental involvement works indirectly on school outcomes by helping the child build a pro-social, pro-learning self-concept and high educational aspirations" (p. 139). Parents may be particularly powerful models for children, since Bandura's work has shown that models are most influential when they are perceived by the child as similar to self, and when there is familiarity and shared history of context and experience (Bandura, 1969). Equally, parents are in a strong position to help children learn through reinforcement in the behaviourist sense – certainly in a stronger position than teachers who may find it difficult to administer contingencies of reinforcement with sufficient frequency or consistency due to the need to work with groups of students (Skinner, 1989). Parents also know what rewards are

likely to be successful with their individual child (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), and in instructional terms, they are more likely to be in a position to respond to their own child's unique learning preferences and style (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burrow, 1995).

Parental involvement can have a motivating effect on teachers, leading them to attend to a child more (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994). Parental involvement has been also linked to higher school retention rates (Malone and McCoy, 2003). These advantages and benefits have been documented nationally and internationally, and many studies have shown that schools in which pupils succeed (defined either by achievement or behaviour) are characterised by good home-school relationships (O'Toole, 2016). Studies have also specifically highlighted the importance of parental involvement for children's successful transitions (O'Toole, 2016), both from pre-school to primary school (Brooker, 2008; Dockett et al., 2011; Dockett and Perry, 2004; Margetts, 2002; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011) and from primary to secondary school (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm and Splittherber, 2000). The *Growing up in Ireland* (GUI) study highlights the importance of formal parental involvement in school (such as engagement with parent teacher meetings and other school events) as a means for supporting pupils in making the transition between primary and post primary school (Smyth, 2017). Most critical in supporting students as they transition between primary and post-primary school is the opportunity to talk informally with parents (Smyth, 2017). Thus, there is evidence accumulated over the past three decades that parental involvement influences student learning and success. As Munn (1993) succinctly expresses, "The more involved parents are with their children's schooling, the greater it seems are the chances of their children doing well" (p. 1).

Parental involvement can also have benefits for the school and teacher in terms of building bridges between home and school learning (Hart, 2011), as well as providing challenge to erroneous assumptions made by school staff, allowing for advocacy roles and ensuring appropriate provision for any special needs (Hartas, 2008). INTO (1997) argues that since parents are in a better position to impact on a child's educational development than any other agency (including the school), teachers would be foolhardy not to utilise to the full the parental potential that is available to them. Parental involvement in education has also been linked to improved parent-teacher relationships, teacher morale and school climate (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Equally, involvement in children's schooling can be beneficial for parents, with research showing increased parental confidence, satisfaction and interest in their own education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Kiely, 2017; O'Toole, 2016).

Of course there are dissenting voices in the research community who maintain that the influence of parents on their children's education has been over-rated (Harris and Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014). Citing methodological and conceptual issues with existing research, some contend that the current policy focus internationally on involving parents in their children's education may be misguided. However, the focus in such critiques is usually on standardised testing as a measure of student outcomes, indicating that measures of parental involvement fail to correlate with test scores (Harris and Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014). Such focus on standardised testing may represent limited interpretation of the objectives of education (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013; 2014), largely ignoring the 'softer' outcomes such as motivation, attitudes towards and engagement with school, and stronger academic

## Conceptual differences have led to some confusion regarding the impact of parents on their children's learning and appropriate ways to support them

(Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Harris and Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014)

self-efficacy beliefs described elsewhere in the literature. For this reason, Kavanagh (2013) refers to this tendency to focus on correlations (or lack thereof) between parental involvement and test scores as "unwise and costly" (p. 25).

The overwhelming consensus in educational research indicates that parents may be a vital factor in educational success for children, and this certainly has implications for policy. However, not all research is clear in defining what exact behaviours are expected of parents, and there are many different, sometimes conflicting, definitions and terminology used in the literature, such as 'parental involvement', 'parental engagement' and 'partnership' (Harris and Robinson, 2016; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; Kavanagh, 2013; Robinson and Harris, 2014). Conceptual differences have led to some confusion regarding the impact of parents on their children's learning and appropriate ways to support them (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Harris and Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014).

### **PARENTAL 'ENGAGEMENT', PARENTAL 'INVOLVEMENT' AND 'PARTNERSHIP'**

Parental involvement in education has been defined as parents' interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success (Hill et al., 2004). Within the literature, 'parental involvement' can mean anything

from sitting on a Board of Management, to attending a parent evening or open day, to ensuring attendance and homework completion, to actively helping in the classroom, with many points of reference in between (Munn, 1993; Dockett, Perry and Kearney, 2012). As far back as the 1990's, authors began to critique the use of the term 'parental involvement' because of inadequate analysis of what that actually means, indicating that if it can mean anything from acting as school governor to receiving adult literacy tuition, then it becomes so all-encompassing as to be meaningless (Hegarty, 1993). Even now, there is still little consensus in the literature regarding how parents should be involved in their children's education, and what types of parental involvement improve outcomes for children (Harris and Robinson, 2016; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; Kavanagh, 2013; O'Toole, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014). Common phrases still in use in the literature include 'parental involvement', 'parental engagement' and 'partnership', with implications for the levels of agency and control of parents and schools within interactions.

If education is synonymous with schooling, then it would make sense that the teacher, as the person in possession of the expertise and knowledge, should dominate interactions with parents, but if schooling is viewed as just part of a child's education in a more holistic sense, then we should see a shift of power and expertise towards parents (Munn, 1993). This more holistic understanding of 'education' has been developing prominence in the literature since the 1990's. For example, INTO (1997) point out that 85% of children's waking time from birth to the end of compulsory education is spent outside the school, and while it might be assumed that the impact of schooling on education is greater than the 15% of waking time allocated to it (Burke, 1992), parents should

be accepted for what they are "in law and reality" (INTO, 1997, p. 18), the co-educators of their children.

Thus, in recent years there has been a move away from the term 'parental involvement' towards the use of the term 'parental engagement' (Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Head Start, 2014). Whilst 'involvement' suggests taking part in an activity, 'engagement' is more than just activity or involvement but a feeling of ownership (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) propose a continuum approach to elucidate the subtleties, with parental involvement with schools, at one end, and parental engagement with children's learning, at the other, recognising it is not a linear progression but rather a 'messy web' of interactions. Such understandings of the dynamic and complex interinfluence within processes like parental involvement and engagement fit well within a bioecological framework (O'Toole, 2016). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) outline three points along the continuum from parental involvement to parental engagement, focussing on the triad of parent, child and school:

- parental involvement with the school (agency of the school),
- parental involvement with schooling (processes surrounding learning and the interchange between parents and schools staff) and,
- parental engagement with children's learning (parental agency, choice and action).

...but if schooling is viewed as just part of a child's education in a more holistic sense, then we should see a shift of power and expertise towards parents (Munn, 1993)

However, Stefanski, Valli and Jacobson (2016) note that these terms are not used consistently in the literature, and sometimes writers use the term 'involvement' when discussing approaches that many would term 'engagement' and vice versa. They argue that the involvement-engagement dichotomy is too simplistic and posit a broader continuum that runs from being served to being empowered, with involvement and engagement falling in the middle.

Much of the thinking underlying this more recent move towards a 'partnership' approach, emphasising the agency of parents, has been based on the work of Joyce Epstein, whose in-depth research and theorisation of this field has been particularly useful. For example, Aistear's Guidelines on Building Partnerships with parents (NCCA, 2009) in Ireland draws on the work of Epstein (2009; 2011). Epstein's (1995) early theory of overlapping spheres of influence shows the importance of schools, families, and communities working together to meet the needs of children, and this approach has particular resonance with a bioecological perspective. Developing this theory, Epstein (2009) identifies six types of parental involvement, ranging from assisting families with parenting skills to increasing communication and direct involvement in schools through activities like volunteering and supporting home learning, up to decision-making at school level and school involvement at community level. Table 1 (see page 16) shows Epstein's six types of parental involvement.

As a school progresses from type 1 (assisting families to develop their parenting role) to type 6 (collaborating with communities) we see a move towards recognition of the agency of parents, and respect for their contributions, rather than assuming that the teacher and

Rather than referring to parental 'involvement' or 'engagement', Epstein's more recent work now favours instead 'school, family and community partnership'

(Epstein and Sheldon, 2016)

the school are the experts, and that parents should be involved to support (and not question) the aims and values of the school. Rather than referring to parental 'involvement' or 'engagement', Epstein's more recent work now favours instead 'school, family and community partnership' (Epstein and Sheldon, 2016), thus recognising the embeddedness of children's learning. Epstein and Sheldon (2016) critique traditional views of family engagement as situated in parent's engagement, and emphasis on the responsibility of the parent to engage, preferring a partnership-led perspective recognising the importance of shared responsibility of home, school and community. The idea of 'partnership' is not new, and Bastiani (1993, p. 105) describes partnership with parents thus:

- Sharing of power, responsibility and ownership
- A degree of mutuality, which begins with the process of listening to each other and incorporates responsive dialogue and 'give and take' on both sides
- Shared aims and goals, based on common ground but which also acknowledge important differences
- A commitment to joint action, in which parents, pupils and professionals work together to get things done

Such partnership would mean that liaising with parents is no longer an "optional extra, a favour to be bestowed on parents" (INTO, 1997, p. 12) but rather that a structured educational partnership is to some degree central to the

concept of the teacher as a professional, and an integral part of professional practice for the effective school (INTO, 1997).

This 'partnership model' has become particularly pervasive in the literature in recent years and seems to represent a particular 'zeitgeist' value at this point in time (Robinson

**Table 1: Epstein's (2009) Six Types of Parental Involvement**

<b>1. Parenting</b>	Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
<b>2. Communicating</b>	Communicate with families about school programmes and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home and design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school progress and children's progress.
<b>3. Volunteering</b>	Improve recruitment, training, activities and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable teachers to work with volunteers who support students and the school.
<b>4. Learning at home</b>	Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting tasks.
<b>5. Decision making</b>	Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organisations, develop parental leaders and representatives.
<b>6. Collaborating with communities</b>	Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organisations, and colleges or universities. Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, family practice and student learning and development.




and Harris, 2014). However, some authors have begun to express concern with this term also, since proclamations of partnership in the absence of practical changes may risk alienation of all involved through breakdown in mutual trust and respect (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Gillece (2015) notes that if parents are simply passive recipients of information rather than active participants in a partnership, then existing power relations may be reinforced. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) extensively critique the use of the term 'partnership', and maintain that "despite its 'feel-good' nature its use is problematic [because] the use of language such as partnership, sharing, mutuality, collaboration, reciprocity and participation, masks the inequalities that exist in reality in the practice of parental involvement" (p. 46). These authors state that many models of parental involvement in education are based on premises of either the child or the parent as 'problem', and a 'partnership' based on such premises are "likely to be doomed to failure from the start" (p. 46). It may be that this is particularly the case in disadvantaged or culturally diverse communities, where parents are rarely considered 'partners' or afforded a role of expertise in relation to their children's education (Dockett et al., 2012). Questioning of the concept of 'partnership' between parents and schools also has a long-established literature. Even in 1993, Munn was describing situations that were termed 'partnerships' but where parents were still expected to uphold school values, through ensuring homework was done, or dress-codes were adhered to, but a parental role in identifying the values the school would embody was rare. Parents who challenged school values were instead (like their children) perceived as 'problems'. It may be that "there is still more rhetoric than reality about family and school working together as genuine partners" (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001, p. 18).

It may be that this is particularly the case in disadvantaged or culturally diverse communities, where parents are rarely considered 'partners' or afforded a role of expertise in relation to their children's education (Dockett et al., 2012)

One of the key messages that emerges from consideration of the literature on parental involvement through a bioecological lens is that it is not enough to mould parents to support the aims and agendas of schools. Deslandes, Barma and Morin (2015) explore issues of trust and control within communication and relationships between teachers and parents, and note the importance of a redistribution of power inside and outside the school. As Kelleghan, Sloane, Alvarez and Bloom (1993) maintain, we must recognise the categories of meaning that students bring with them into the classroom, since it is through these meanings that children produce and interpret knowledge. It may be that parents can provide the interpretive bridge (through the power of the meso-system) that allows schools and educationalists to access these meanings (Hayes et al., 2017).

In addition to confusion over terminology, it may be that while the rhetoric supporting parents' roles in education is extensive, there is considerable variation in the reality of its practice (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; O'Kane, 2007). Thus, while few writers at this point deny the need to involve parents in their children's education, the nature and extent of that involvement and the factors which may affect it are still unclear. Disagreement exists



not just on how parents are, or should be, involved, but also in the terminology associated with that involvement, and which elements may be related to academic outcomes in children (Harris and Robinson, 2016). Therefore, the value of a structure like the PPCT research model becomes evident, because it allows for consideration of multiple factors and perspectives on parental involvement, engagement and partnership, without losing coherence (O'Toole, 2017). The analysis of the literature provided in the next section uses the headings of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' to explore key issues related to parents and education. It is followed by a summary and conclusions section, explicitly identifying how the literature review answers the research questions.

# Parental involvement, engagement and partnership through the lens of PPCT

## THE POWER OF 'PROCESS'

Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) concept of 'proximal processes' highlights the crucial role of relationships and interactions for optimal outcomes for children and families. Dockett et al. (2011) note the importance of relationship-building between teachers and parents, giving families the opportunity to build links for their children between prior-to-school and school experiences. Educators also have the opportunity to build relationships with children, families and communities through sharing their own expertise, while recognising the expertise of others (Dockett et al., 2011). However, research shows that in many cases parents do not perceive schools to be as open and accessible as teachers believe themselves to be (Hall et al., 2008), and when parents feel that their involvement is not valued by teachers or schools, they are less likely to get involved (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013).

Often parents believe that teachers are seeking only a superficial relationship, concerned with addressing problems rather than working towards solutions (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). However, when teachers are proactive in seeking, inviting and encouraging involvement from parents, parent-school partnerships can be effective (Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba and Henderson, 2013; Mapp, 2003). Feiler, Greenhough, Winter, Salway and Scanlon (2006) indicate that communication with parents must be well-planned and proactive if it is to be effective, and Epstein's (2001)

the responsiveness of teachers is a key element in promoting family engagement at school

Dockett et al. (2012),

work showed that a consistent feature of strategies that are particularly useful in enhancing partnerships between parents and schools is that teachers actively promote links between home and school. According to Dockett et al. (2012), "the responsiveness of teachers is a key element in promoting family engagement at school" (p. 58). This is important to note because parents' proactivity may be limited by feelings of intimidation (Kiely, 2017; O'Toole, 2016).

International work has shown that parent-teacher interactions are often shaped by differing expectations and vested interests (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) – as Reay (2010) puts it, the 'taken-for-granted' in each case may be at variance. These findings have been confirmed in the Irish context, with O'Kane (2007) indicating that schools' expectations of parents are often not outlined as clearly as their expectations of children. For instance, NicCraith and Fay (2008) found that Irish parents often do not understand the importance of play at junior infant level, and sometimes expect the focus to shift to development of reading and writing skills immediately on transition to primary school. This is noted also by both Brooker (2008) in the UK and O'Kane (2015) in Ireland. There are often also significant differences between parents and teachers (as well as

## There is a difference between a 'string of episodic interactions' and a 'relationship' involving shared meaning and understanding

(Lasky, 2000)

among them) in terms of attitudes and expectations for parental involvement in education (Bastiani, 1993). The IEA Preprimary Project found little agreement between parents and teachers on their expectations for four-year-olds, particularly in the Irish sample (Kernan and Hayes, 1999). This is an important point, considering Hayes et al.'s (2017) contention that for high quality, effective education, it is crucial that expectations are as similar as possible.

As such, it is important to research the concept of the parent as 'school-parent' through a variety of lenses. According to O'Kane (2007), a responsibility rests with the educational setting to ensure that parents clearly understand what is expected of them, and that policies and practices are well explained, because in the interaction between school and home, parents are generally less experienced than teachers, particularly when the child attending the school is the first in a family to do so (O'Toole, 2016). Schools should also be aware of, and work towards a balance in power relations (O'Toole, 2017). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) maintain that schools often view parents as tools for increasing children's achievements, cost effective resources or methods of addressing cultural inequality and disadvantage, but parents' goals are more likely to be focused, naturally, on their own child. Kavanagh, Shiel, Gilleece and Kiniry (2015) found that principals did not always value the parental role as important for achievement, and teachers did not always know how to

forge relationships with parents. These authors recommend increased emphasis on parental involvement in Initial Teacher Education so that teachers can explore the needs of parents and positive ways of making connections with them.

For example, there are often differing agendas for parent-teacher meetings. According to Hall et al. (2008), teachers in Ireland are clear and unanimous about the purpose of the annual parent-teacher meeting: to inform parents of their children's progress, communicate their learning strengths and weaknesses, and help identify ways of supporting their child's learning at home. While they are sensitive to the need to engage with what parents think is important, teachers generally operate this forum as one in which they are in 'telling and explanation' mode and parents are listening. However, parents may want to use parent-teacher meetings to discuss their concerns, and when teachers are not predisposed to listen, barriers to positive parental involvement can develop (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Such dynamics in parent-teacher meetings have also been shown in international research (Walker and McClure, 1999), and again suggest that sometimes the importance of relationship-building is underestimated in educational practice.

There is a difference between a 'string of episodic interactions' and a 'relationship' involving shared meaning and understanding (Lasky, 2000). Notions of 'teacher-as-expert' may also still be prevalent in practice, and this of course can impact on teachers' willingness to interact with parents as equals (Lasky, 2000). In spite of the importance of good communication between parents and teachers for children's educational outcomes, O'Kane's (2007) study reported a general lack of

communication between parents and educational staff, and suggested that better home-school relationships would heighten parents' sense of involvement in their child's education. This resonates with the INTO's (1997) appeal for greater commitment from teachers to communicate their practices and procedures to parents on a regular basis.

However, more recent work on parental engagement with schools (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018; O'Toole, 2016; 2017) provides more optimistic findings on relationships between teachers and parents, indicating that many schools are successful in creating positive home-school links. A key feature of approaches that are successful in building good home-school partnerships is proactive relationship-building, and creation of responsive communication structures that allow parents to engage in a manner that is convenient, open and flexible enough to allow for the needs of families with limited time and / or resources (Gonzalez et al., 2013). It seems that the approaches to home-school partnership that work emphasise two-way communication that is available in a variety of ways and at all reasonable times (Bastiani, 1993; Hart, 2011; Hegarty, 1993; INTO, 1997). Such communication structures and relationship-building initiatives must be responsive to individual 'person' factors in order to ensure optimal outcomes.

### **THE IMPACT OF 'PERSON' FACTORS ON PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP**

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) maintain that parents' belief that they have the ability to help their children succeed at school is crucial to positive involvement. They indicate that parents with low self-efficacy beliefs regarding education are likely to avoid contact with schools because they feel that their involvement will not

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bring about positive outcomes for their children. This factor has been highlighted internationally– for example Yamamoto, Holloway and Sawako (2016) note the impact of maternal role construction and self-efficacy beliefs in the Japanese context. Parents' own level of education may influence their self-efficacy beliefs about whether they have the necessary skills and knowledge to support their children's education (O'Toole, 2016). This in turn may impact on parental behaviour in seeking involvement in their child's education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). For example, a parent who did not complete secondary level education may be hesitant to offer support once their child reaches secondary-school age (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

Equally, parents who believe that children's intelligence is fixed and academic achievement is based solely on ability are less likely to become involved in their children's education than those who believe that achievement depends as much on effort and other factors as it does on ability (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). This makes sense in the context of an understanding of the effects of self-efficacy beliefs; if parents' believe that children's innate ability sets limits on their achievement so that encouraging them to do their homework or attending parent-teacher meetings are a waste of time, then they are less likely to seek involvement in their child's education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). One other influence on parents' self-efficacy beliefs in relation to education is obviously their own experience of school,



and as Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) point out, parents' role-construction for involvement in their children's education is often based on personal experience. Rätty (2007; 2010) has shown that parents with positive recollections of school tend to indicate higher levels of satisfaction with their children's education than those with negative recollections. Therefore, parents' own experiences could potentially impact on their interactions with schools. Rätty (2010) explains this by pointing out that when a child starts school, the parents' own memories are likely to be activated and to function as a basis for their interactions. For example, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) indicate that parents who, in their own childhood, experienced learning or behavioural difficulties are likely to have less confidence in dealing with their children's schools and teachers. As Reay (2005) states, parents' personal histories and own educational experiences can have huge influences on their involvement in their children's schooling, with those whose experiences of school were positive more likely to be involved, and those whose experiences were negative being less likely to be involved. Mulkerrins (2007) and Kiely (2017) also found that some Irish parents' lack of participation with their child's school was due to negative school experiences which shattered their confidence.

Such memories and beliefs may also influence the attitudes to education that parents transmit to their children, since the 'family habitus' (Brooker, 2008; Bourdieu, 1997), or dispositions to approach situations in certain ways, is often developed based on parents' experiences of school, or family stories that implicitly transmit certain views of school (Dockett et al., 2012). Equally, parents' experiences with a child's previous school influence their expectations and attitudes towards the current school and teacher (Hornby and

According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), parents who believe that their only role in education is to get their child to the school gates at which point the teacher takes over are less likely to become involved

Lafaele, 2011). Therefore, "parents' school recollections can be seen as one potential social-psychological link in the chain through which the meanings of education are transmitted from one generation to the next" (Rätty, 2010, p. 581). Certainly, it can be difficult to separate children's positive and negative expectations of school from those of the adults around them (Lucey and Reay, 2000).

Regardless of the origin of parents' attitudes to education, such attitudes and beliefs may play a crucial role in family experiences of education, and the likelihood of parents to become involved in their children's education. According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), parents who believe that their only role in education is to get their child to the school gates at which point the teacher takes over are less likely to become involved. As such, "parental-role construction for involvement in children's education reflects parents' expectations and beliefs about what they should do in relation to children's schooling and what is 'the norm' for parents" (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p. 201). According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001, p. 201), several investigators have reported parents' beliefs that involvement in children's schooling is a "normal requirement and responsibility of parenting". It is important to note, however, that there is little consideration of social and cultural differences in the analysis put forward by Hoover-Dempsey and her

colleagues, and their work appears to treat 'parents' as one homogeneous group. This is increasingly unacceptable, since culture can have such significant impacts on parents' attitudes to education and the development of norms in relation to parental involvement in education (Young, 1998; Yamamoto et al., 2016). This is explored in detail below but is worth mentioning here also, since such limited understanding may lead to deficit models of parents who do not become actively involved in their children's education (O'Toole, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014). Approaches to encouraging positive home-school partnership that work proactively target parents' confidence, self-efficacy beliefs and understanding that their input matters and can be effective (O'Toole, 2016). There is increasing evidence that such approaches by schools can be successful in building genuine parental involvement, engagement and partnership (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018).

There are many other factors in terms of parents' personal circumstances that require consideration. For example, single parents or parents with young or large families may find it difficult to schedule involvement in their children's education due to their care-taking duties (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). The INTO (1997) found that in most schools children are expected to stay at home while parent-teacher meetings take place. This could potentially lead to situations where parents with no child-care support would have to forgo the opportunity to meet with their child's teacher. Equally, employment status and work commitments inevitably impact on parental input (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013). Those parents with stressful jobs may have less time available to them to support their children's education, particularly where employment structures allow little flexibility and both parents work (Hornby and Lafaele,

...and when families are already experiencing challenges, starting school can represent a 'turning point', becoming "a time of both opportunity and additional vulnerability

(Dockett and Perry, 2012, p. 60)

2011). Parents who work have less opportunity to avail of support networks, such as connections with other parents (Dockett et al., 2012). Conversely, those parents who are unemployed may not be in a position to financially support their child's education or to pay for babysitters or transport to get to school meetings (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents with poor physical or mental health or with minimal social supports available to them may also find it difficult to engage actively with their child's education (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and when families are already experiencing challenges, starting school can represent a 'turning point', becoming "a time of both opportunity and additional vulnerability" (Dockett and Perry, 2012, p. 60).

In Bourdieu's (1997) terms, some parents have less opportunity to develop the social and cultural capital to enable them to support their children as well as they might like to. Such issues clearly affect individual parents' abilities to relate to schools, and again, the schools that are identified in the literature as having developed successful strategies for home-school partnership are those that have been proactive in putting structures and contextual supports in place to overcome these potential barriers, characterised by capacity to engage parents, respectful and effective leadership in relation to families and children, and institutionalised authentic partnerships (Ma et al., 2016).

## CONTEXT

### Micro-system: The Role of the School

The quality of parents' interaction with schools at times can be significantly impacted by the structural and contextual supports provided to them. One 'context'-based consideration is whether a whole-school approach is taken to encouraging parental involvement in their children's education. When schools are actively welcoming to parents and make it clear at whole-school level that they value parental involvement, they are more effective in developing home-school relationships than schools that do not appear inviting (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Many schools develop specific programmes to encourage positive home-school partnerships, and the existence and content of such programmes can be seen as a crucial contextual support for parental involvement, engagement and partnership (O'Toole, 2016). Epstein and Sheldon (2016) published a study drawing on "organisational learning and leadership theories to study the development of school-based programs of family and community engagement" (p. 212). They reported that the partnership programmes that worked (as defined by increased family engagement, higher rates of average daily attendance by students, and better academic and behavioural outcomes) were those that were well-organised and goal-linked, and focused

When schools are actively welcoming to parents and make it clear at whole-school level that they value parental involvement, they are more effective in developing home-school relationships than schools that do not appear inviting

(Hornby and Lafaele, 2011)

on actively increasing the involvement of more and different parents. According to Epstein and Sheldon (2016), the role of the school principal is vital in creating welcoming school environments that tend to be successful in forming positive home-school partnerships. They call for 'side by side' leadership as opposed to top down approaches, and while they note that there is a need for further research on "whether and how district and school leadership and programs of partnership increase the number and diversity of involved parents and whether and how their engagement affects student success in school", they also maintain that "when effective and equitable school organisational practices are in place, more parents become involved and students benefit" (p. 215).

An Irish study of parental involvement (O'Toole, 2016) supported Epstein and Sheldon's (2016) finding that the role of the principal is crucial, highlighting the impact of leadership that prioritises home-school partnerships, so that significant time and effort are invested in promoting them. One aspect of this is consideration of the physical structures of schools, which can also contribute to well-designed and effective liaison with parents. In O'Toole's (2016) research, parental access to the school building was identified as highly valued. Schools that require children to line up outside before and after school, rather than allowing parents to go in at drop-off and collection time, limit the opportunities for informal communication, and provide an implicit message to parents that they are not welcome. On the other hand, schools that allow parents to bring children to their classrooms are "breaking down all the barriers and saying 'this is your place', there is a space for parents and we value what you say" (O'Toole, 2016, p. 295). This supports previous work by INTO (1997) who note

However, the strongest and most important contextual facilitator of home-school partnership was simply a welcoming attitude reflected in day-to-day practices like greeting parents in the morning and evening ...

O'Toole (2016)

that the majority of Irish schools were not designed with parental involvement in mind, and many schools require discussions between parents and teachers to take place in corridors because of the lack of an appropriate space such as a parents' room. They maintain that while acknowledging the difficulties schools may have in terms of resources and space, the schools in which home-school partnership is effective provide a designated room in which teachers and parents can meet in relative privacy. Similar findings were reported by O'Toole (2016) who found that a parents' room may provide both a practical solution to the need for a private space for parents and teachers to meet, but may also give a powerful message regarding the welcome for parents within the walls of the school.

O'Toole's (2016) work also found that positive home-school partnerships were facilitated by the development of home-school communication systems that were both informal, based on personal relationships, and formal based on systems like parent-teacher meetings, homework journals, technology-based communication systems (e.g. emails, 'e-portal' systems like 'edmodo' or 'class dojo' accessed by both parents and teachers, text messaging systems, etc), information evenings, parents'

handbooks and opportunities to make appointments to meet when a discussion requires greater focus than can be given in passing at drop-off or collection time. Also of value were formal programmes to increase parents' self-efficacy beliefs, skills and understanding of curriculum requirements through approaches such as parents' classes in areas like English and Irish language, literacy packs to support reading in the home, and information on specific aspects of the curriculum. However, the strongest and most important contextual facilitator of home-school partnership reported by O'Toole (2016) was simply a welcoming attitude reflected in day-to-day practices like greeting parents in the morning and evening and friendly interactions that make parents feel like a welcome part of the school community.

Of course, the school is not the only micro-system for consideration in a study of parental involvement, engagement and partnership, and increasingly the home learning environment has been identified as a key factor in how parents contribute to their children's education (Brooker, 2015).

### **Micro-system: The home learning environment**

In recent years, there is increasing recognition that the most powerful aspects of parents' involvement in their children's education may take place outside of the formal education system (Brooker, 2015). Experiences at home, resources, home routines and other aspects of the home environment can significantly impact on a child's experience of education (Dockett et al., 2012). Researchers often distinguish between home-based parental involvement, like helping children with homework, or reading with them, and school-based parental involvement, like attendance at parent-teacher meetings (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Robinson and

Home-based involvement includes any activities parents implement in the home that reinforce school-based learning, including monitoring homework completion, checking homework, and educational enrichment activities

(Benner and Sadler, 2016)

Harris, 2014), and the effectiveness of both types has been widely supported in the literature (Jeynes, 2005; 2007). Two of Epstein's (2009) conceptualisation of types of parental involvement relate solely or largely to the home environment, type 1, parenting (assisting families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level; assisting schools in understanding families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children) and type 4, learning at home (involving families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities; encouraging teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting tasks).

Home-based involvement includes any activities parents implement in the home that reinforce school-based learning, including monitoring homework completion, checking homework, and educational enrichment activities (Benner and Sadler, 2016). According to Dockett et al. (2012) 'family readiness' or the ability to support children's learning at home is crucial to the development of 'school readiness' in children. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) identify 'at-home good parenting' as highly significant

for children's achievement, even after all other factors affecting attainment have been taken into account.

'Good parenting' is defined as:

- The provision of a secure and stable environment
- Intellectual stimulation
- Parent-child discussion
- Constructive social and educational values
- High aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship.

In Ireland, the *National Assessments of English Reading and Maths* (Eivers et al., 2010; Kavanagh et al., 2015) identify aspects of home atmosphere that are specifically and significantly linked to high achievement in English and Maths. Children tend to score highly when they have lots of books in the home, have internet access and have access to educational games. Access to some technologies is linked with higher scores – such as having computer at home – but access to other technologies is linked with lower scores – such as having a television in the bedroom and owning a smart phone. Parents' expectations of future reading and maths achievements were also related to performance, and parent behaviours that supported high achievement included actively setting time aside for reading for pleasure and agreeing rules for behaviour at home. The authors of the *National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics* note that some aspects of the home learning environment that predict test scores are not changeable, for example findings related to single parent status, socio-economics, etc. However, they state that some factors are potentially responsive to advice to parents on how to support their children's achievement – for example the number of books in the home, parents reading for leisure and modelling positive attitudes to reading, setting time



## ...low levels of parental monitoring were linked with poorer literacy achievement

(Gilliece, 2015)

aside for children to read for pleasure, being a member of a public library and the frequency with which child reads for pleasure alone. Parental monitoring variables also had much stronger associations with positive outcomes in these studies than formal school based involvement like committee membership, and the authors recommend that parents are advised to limit time spent playing with computer games, watching television and on the internet. Gilliece's (2015) work analysing the outcomes from the Irish sample in the PIRLS (Progress in Reading Literacy Study) international study supports these findings, showing that low levels of parental monitoring were linked with poorer literacy achievement as measured by standardised testing. Parental monitoring through behavioural involvement and home supervision was also highlighted by Ma et al. (2016). Like the *National Assessments*, Gilliece's (2015) research found that informal, home-based measures of involvement (such as high academic expectations, and the number of books in a home) were identified as more influential than formal, school-based measures.

These findings regarding the relative effectiveness of home-based and school-based involvement have been replicated internationally, and according to Benner and Sadler (2016), parents' formal involvement in school-led activities tends to have more variable outcomes, whereas the areas most strongly linked to students' achievement are involvement in home-led activities like enrichment activities (e.g. swimming, visiting zoos, museums and other interesting activities, exposure to music and drama, etc) and parents' academic socialisation. These authors

define academic socialisation as including indirect messages about school that communicate parents' expectations for the child. Views of the importance of education can also be communicated, and concrete discussions may also take place in which parents directly promote the development of their children's future educational and occupational plans. Benner and Sadler (2016) state that academic socialisation provides children with the tools necessary for independence and educational success.

Harris and Robinson (2016) agree with this perspective, and identify four aspects of parental behaviour that is successful in supporting academic achievement in their children, none of which involve direct involvement with schools:

1. parents are supportive
2. parents skilfully navigate school choices
3. parents effectively convey the importance of school
4. label of being 'smart' is applied to children by parents

Harris and Robinson argue for a new understanding and framework for home-based parental involvement utilising a theatre metaphor of 'stage setting' and the 'performance'. Stage setters are in charge of setting the context and creating 'life space' which the authors (2016, p.188) deem to be "...the parameters within which the actor's performance occurs – that corresponds with the intended action." Poor stage setting relates to poor performance, but the authors do not suggest such a simplistic relationship between home learning environment and academic achievement. A good performance contains two essential elements, the actor embodying their role and, that of stage setter responsible for an environment that strengthens, not compromises, the actor's embodiment

## lack of engagement with formal support structures like information evenings may be a function of busy lifestyles as opposed to disinterest in children's education

(Harris and Robinson, 2016)

of their role, and this resonates with Bronfenbrenner's image of an active child influencing and being influenced by his or her environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). In their reconceptualisation of parental involvement, Harris and Robinson (2016) argue that whilst traditional understandings of parental involvement include a multitude of parental activities, stage setting comprises of just two elements: messages and life space, shifting away from engagement in actual activities and rooting it more in lifestyle. This shift allows, they argue, for busy parents with minimal direct involvement in their child's schooling to be successful stage setters. Thus the authors maintain that traditional understanding of parental involvement located in a multitude of activities restricts recognition that parents who do not have direct involvement are still powerful forces in their children's academic outcomes. In using their 'stage setting' approach, acknowledgment is given to the role of parents which is perhaps lost in more traditional understandings of parental involvement. For example, Kavanagh et al. (2015) express concern about gaps between parents' expressed interest in accessing information on children's education, availability of information evenings, and limited attendance at such evenings. Harris and Robinson's (2016) conceptualisation allows us to recognise that lack of engagement with

formal support structures like information evenings may be a function of busy lifestyles as opposed to disinterest in children's education.

However, some critics of approaches that focus on home learning environment identify the fact that there may still often be an emphasis on schools dictating to parents the types of learning that should be happening in the home, rather than drawing on the 'funds of knowledge' that children and families draw from their own cultures and ways of learning (Brooker, 2015; Hayes et al., 2017). Edwards and Warrin (1999) indicate that this may mean that schools "use parents to help deliver an over-loaded curriculum" but fail to recognise the "real role of parents as the child's earliest teachers and as the builders of learning identities on which all learning is based" (p. 325). They refer to this as "a form of colonisation, rather than collaboration" (p. 330). An example of such colonisation of home lives might be seen in the recommendation from the authors of the *National Assessments of English Reading and Maths* that parents limit children's time spent playing with friends as less time spent with friends is correlated with higher scores on standardised tests (Kavanagh et al., 2015). This is highly questionable when one considers the extensive evidence that play supports children's learning in areas that are arguably more important than measures of standardised tests such as oral language skills, social skills and self-regulation skills (Hayes et al., 2017). Equally, it is perhaps unfair to expect parents who have had negative educational experiences and maybe even experienced prejudice within education systems, such as that documented in groups from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, to transmit positive messages of academic socialisation to their children (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

While increasing recognition of the value of home learning environments, and deconstruction of what form home learning may take are important steps forward in understanding parental involvement, engagement and partnership, evaluations of parenting and what constitutes a 'good' home learning environment must be treated with caution, since they are so emotionally and culturally loaded (O'Toole, 2016). For example, Bæck's (2017) research explores educational systems' "presupposition for academic socialization... in terms of inequity in education and symbolic violence" (p. 123). Similarly, Brooker (2008) critiques approaches such as the tick box systems used to measure home learning environment in the UK. She gives the example of her own research with a family who, on the surface, met the criterion for a 'good' home learning environment through availability of books in the home, but who on qualitative interview explained that the child would not be allowed to touch the books until she was able to read so that they would not be ruined. On the other hand, Brooker (2008) shows how some families who seemed not to meet the criterion of availability of books in the home in fact provided their children with rich interaction with literacy through sacred texts, magazines, newspapers, etc. Benner and Sadler (2016) also note that school-based involvement seems to be particularly beneficial for more disadvantaged youth (i.e., those with poorer prior achievement, those from lower-SES families), whereas parents' educational expectations, one form of academic socialisation, seems to support the academic success of more advantaged youth.

Albeit with these cautions around culturally-sensitive measures of what *constitutes* a positive home learning environment, research is increasingly emphasising a more inclusive understanding of how children's learning

## Homework connects teachers, students, and parents

(Rosario, Nunez, Vallejo, Cunha, Nunes, Mourão and Pinto, 2015)

is influenced by their parents, beyond traditional measures of involvement (Benner and Sadler, 2016; Harris and Robinson, 2016). Nevertheless, the traditional use of homework still constitutes one of the most important linkages between home and school learning for the majority of Irish children.

### **Meso-system: The role of homework**

One of the main ways that parents interface with the curriculum during the primary school years is through helping their child with homework. Homework is an area of children's education that could be said to almost universally affect children and parents, and is therefore a necessary component of a study on parental involvement in their children's education. Homework connects teachers, students, and parents (Rosario, Nunez, Vallejo, Cunha, Nunes, Mourão and Pinto, 2015). Through a bioecological lens, homework can be seen as a key linkage in the meso-system (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Traditionally homework has been used as a point of contact about school between children and parents (Epstein and van Voorhis, 2012), but the literature based on both international and Irish studies reveals arguments for and against homework, and the efficacy of parents' role in it.

Cooper (1989) defined homework as the tasks assigned by teachers to students to be completed outside the class. Some writers argue that these outside-of-class tasks are an effective way of linking school and home (Epstein and van Voorhis, 2012). Rosario et al. (2015) described homework as an opportunity for practice,

## Homework can have both positive and negative effects on children's learning and family relationships depending on how it is structured

(Center for Public Education, 2007; Cooper et al., 2006; Marzano and Pickering, 2007)

preparation, and extension activities, that is, practice of skills and content learned at school, preparation for work to be done in school and extending work commenced in school. Purposes of homework include the provision of an opportunity to the child to practice or review material already presented in class (Cooper, Robinson and Patall, 2006); nurturing children's ability to manage their own learning, developing children's learning dispositions, promoting independent problem-solving skills and encouraging children to make school – real world connections, thus seeing the relevance of school learning in their lives (Cooper, 2007; Jackson and Harbison, 2014).

Homework can have both positive and negative effects on children's learning and family relationships depending on how it is structured (Center for Public Education, 2007; Cooper et al., 2006; Marzano and Pickering, 2007). Over the past decades attitudes towards homework have swung between positive and negative. Cooper et al. (2006) describe how homework was in vogue in the 1900s, out of favour in the 1940s, back in the 1950s, out in the mid-1960s, back in fashion the 1980s and unpopular again in the 2000s. In their synthesis of studies on homework, Cooper et al., (2006) caution that studies on homework are so prolific that it is possible to use the literature to champion any opinion.

Rudman (2014) also comments on the proliferation of studies and on the complexity of issues around it. He concludes that decisions around homework can best be made within the cultural context where the homework is being conducted. Rudman (2014) notes that despite an abundance of studies on homework, relatively few studies focus on primary schools or on homework in the United Kingdom. This resonates with investigations from this current review, which found only two Irish studies dedicated to homework, Jackson and Harbison (2014) and the Lynch, (2016) study. There are also two other ongoing studies that focused on homework in primary school classrooms in Ireland as part of broader investigations (*Growing up in Ireland* – Smyth, 2017, Williams et al., 2009 and *National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics* – Eivers et al., 2010; Kavanagh et al., 2015). Given the dearth of Irish research on homework, we have explored these relevant Irish studies here, and the review then proceeds to identify and analyse themes from the international literature that may, with adaptation, be relevant to the Irish context.

### Homework in the Irish Context

Jackson and Harbison's (2014) study - *An evaluation of the utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms* – published in the Irish National Teachers Organisation's (INTO) *Irish Teachers' Journal*, may merit particular comment. This was a small-scale, non-generalisable study on homework in a Dublin suburb with parents of children from junior infants to sixth class. Children's and teachers' views on homework were not sought for the study. The authors mentioned concerns raised by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) (2010) about homework, in relation to the erosion of quality time between parent and child and the impact of homework

on teaching time in the classroom. Resonant with the concept of 'colonisation of the home' (Edwards and Warrin, 1999), Jackson and Harbison (2014) cited writers who noted the strain homework puts on family life (e.g. Kralovec and Buell, 2000), how homework causes family tensions with parents unsure of how to support their children, finding themselves having to police homework and having unrealistic expectations of their children's performance at homework tasks. They argued that children can be left with no time to explore their own interests or to be involved in undirected activities that may help them to discover lifetime interests (Marzano and Pickering, 2007, as cited in Jackson and Harbison, 2014).

Homework policies were examined in this study and parent respondents to the questionnaire felt they were not adequately informed about homework policies and were not aware of the content of same. A recommendation that an abridged version of the homework policy be sent to all parents was mooted. Interesting data from the study include the following:

- 99% of respondents thought that homework provided a good link between home and school.
- 100% of respondents felt that the amount of homework assigned in their school was either very reasonable or somewhat reasonable. No response indicated that the quantity of homework was unreasonable. This may seem surprising, given that popular opinion would seem to indicate the opposite. It is unfortunate that there is an absence of clarity in relation to the number of schools surveyed. The sample was a convenience sample and it could therefore be deduced that if more than one school was involved, the schools came from the same Dublin suburb.

- 65% of parents said that they did not feel fully equipped to support their children with their homework.
- 78% of parents reported that homework creates upset between parent and child. In posing this question, the Likert scale could possibly have erred because parents were asked to respond to the question "Does homework create upset between child and parent?" by ticking one of the following options: Never, Sometimes, Occasionally, Frequently. The option to tick 'occasionally' and 'sometimes' seem like much the same thing. Be that as it may, it is alarming that 32% ticked 'sometimes', 22% ticked 'occasionally', and 36% ticked 'frequently' in response to the question.

Jackson and Harbison (2014) concluded that it is not the act of the assignment of homework that is important but rather the type of homework that is assigned. Homework should have a clear purpose, be customised to suit students' needs, promote student autonomy and appeal to students aesthetically to motivate children (p.60). Communication between parents and schools should be improved, with an emphasis on parent-school, rather than school-parent (p.61). Finally, a radical overhaul of homework was deemed necessary by the authors, based on their findings (Jackson and Harbison, 2014, p.61).

Homework should have a clear purpose, be customised to suit students' needs, promote student autonomy and appeal to students aesthetically to motivate children.

Jackson and Harbison (2014)

In Lynch's (2016) study for the National Parents Council Primary, 2,330 children, 5,752 parents and 1,337 teachers were surveyed. While the majority of parental<sup>1</sup> respondents (61%) felt that children got the right amount of homework, they also reported that children tended to need their help in completing the homework (86%). They reported a range of homework helping strategies employed by parents, ranging from more directive approaches like answering questions for children, to checking homework or quizzing children when they were finished, to simply watching or sitting with children as they worked. Interestingly, the study found that homework caused significant stress for both parents (74%) and children (82% – parental report). Nevertheless, parents reported that they felt homework did support their children's learning (up to 70%). Lynch (2016) notes that a lot of time is spent in Irish homes and schools setting, completing, supervising and checking homework, and in the light of her findings with regards to stress for parents and children, she recommends that further research should be completed to investigate the efficacy of homework as a learning strategy.

With reference to the *Growing up in Ireland* study (GUI), almost all children in the nine year old cohort were assigned homework several times a week (Williams et al., 2009). Most nine year olds were reported to complete their homework, yet they tended to spend more time on completing homework than expected by the teacher (Williams et al., 2009). Family composition and social background impacted on homework completion with children in single parent families, those with greater numbers of siblings and living in more socio-economically challenged communities less likely to complete homework (Williams et al., 2009). Boys were also less likely to complete homework than girls

## Mothers indicated that they felt they knew what was going on in school, particularly in relation to learning across subject areas and assessment

Smyth (2017)

(Williams et al., 2009). The GUI study also identified that homework was often used as a form of punishment in school (Williams et al., 2009). It also found a high level of parental involvement in helping the children with their homework at age nine (Smyth, 2017, Williams et al., 2009). Helping with homework was seen as a means for increasing involvement with and knowledge of school (Smyth, 2017). However, there was a significant shift in parental involvement as the children transitioned into post-primary school, with the majority of parents indicating they helped 'now and again' (Smyth, 2017). 'Never' helping the children with homework was more prevalent in one parent households, in families where parents were economically inactive, where the mother had low secondary education, and where the household had a low income level (Smyth, 2017; Williams et al., 2009). Parents were more likely to help with homework when the child had a special educational need (Smyth, 2017).

Interestingly, high levels of informal involvement (such as supporting pupils with homework) did not correlate with more formal levels of engagement with school (such as attending parent teacher meetings and school events) (Smyth, 2017). There was little evidence of an association between the quality of relationships with parents and the level of involvement in homework across the cohort (Smyth, 2017). Mothers indicated that they felt they knew what was going on in school, particularly in relation to learning across subject areas and assessment (Smyth, 2017). They had an awareness of the nature of

<sup>1</sup> Children's responses are explored on page 38.



Perhaps unexpectedly, children who received least support with their homework aged nine experienced less difficulties when moving into second level education, explained as a result of greater independence and academic preparedness.

Smyth (2017)

homework being assigned and indicated that their children wanted to tell them about their school experiences (with girls identified as more likely to report on their school day than boys) (Smyth, 2017).

Perhaps unexpectedly, children who received least support with their homework aged nine experienced less difficulties when moving into second level education, explained as a result of greater independence and academic preparedness (Smyth, 2017). Children in the nine year old cohort suggested that by reducing the amount of homework in school this would contribute to improving their quality of life (Harris, Doyle and Greene, 2011). The importance of engaging in after school activities, specifically homework clubs, was perceived as an important means for improving children's social and other skills (Williams et al., 2009). The nine year old children who participated in homework clubs were identified as being from households with greater socio-economic need and whose mother had the lowest level of academic attainment (Williams et al., 2009).

Eivers et al.'s (2010) study *The 2009 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading*, and Kavanagh et al.'s (2015) study *The 2014 National Assessments of*

*Mathematics and English Reading* did not focus exclusively on homework, but rather reported findings on how homework impacted on achievement in English reading and mathematics within broader studies on variables influencing these outcomes. Both studies reported similar findings, namely that parental confidence in helping with homework and having agreed rules about completing homework were linked to higher achievement. Parents in these studies did not always know how to effectively support children's learning through homework, and the authors emphasise the importance of home-school communication in this regard. For example, it would seem that Irish parents receive limited feedback on test results when compared with international samples, and Kavanagh et al. (2015) recommend NCCA's parents' guides to standardised assessment so that parents can realistically evaluate their child's performance and so support them appropriately<sup>2</sup>. Similar to the GUI findings, these studies reported a negative correlation between children's achievement and parents helping with homework.

### Homework in the International Literature

There is a large amount of popular commentary around homework in the media and in popular literature (Rudman, 2014, p.13). According to Rudman, popular literature tends to have a negative view of homework whereas "professional" (2014, p.13) literature contains strong views on the effectiveness and usefulness of homework. Within the professional literature, however, there is little consensus amongst teachers and researchers around the planning and setting of homework or on the efficacy of homework as a learning tool (Rudman, 2014, p.13). Table 2 (see page 34) summarises relevant findings from the literature on the positive and negative effects of homework, and the debates and tensions related to homework are explored

<sup>2</sup> NCCA support for parents are detailed on page 46

in more detail in the following sections which highlight correlations between homework and achievement, deconstruct the role of parents as a mediating factor in the efficacy of homework, and identify recommendations on homework by drawing on the relevant literature.

### Homework and Achievement

While research on homework in the Irish context is limited, a number of syntheses of studies on homework, e.g. Cooper, (1989), Cooper et al., (2006) and Patall, Cooper and Robinson (2008) have been conducted in the U.S. and other countries. Of course a bioecological perspective would caution that international findings may or may not transfer to Irish settings, but it is worthwhile to consider findings from syntheses of studies because similar findings from a multiplicity of similar single studies arguably make a finding more credible and trustworthy (Cicchetti, 2016). Cooper et al., (2006) found a positive link between homework and student attainment, that is, students who did homework achieved better in school. “We think it would not be imprudent, based on the evidence in hand, to conclude that doing homework causes improved academic achievement” (p. 48). However, the correlation (and correlation is not to be equated with causation) was much stronger for older students than

for those in younger classes. The grade-level effect, that is, what stage of schooling the child is at, influenced the effectiveness of homework (Cooper et al., 2006). This has been confirmed in subsequent studies (Núñez et al., 2015) and resonates with the bioecological emphasis on the impact of time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Cooper’s earlier (1989) study found that homework had no association with achievement gains in elementary (i.e. primary) school. Reasons posited by the authors for the grade-level effect were that younger children may struggle more than older children to ignore irrelevant information or to ignore distractions in their environment and they may have less effective study habits than older children. The amount of homework and the purposes of homework assigned by teachers could also affect the homework-achievement relationship in the primary school years. Cooper et al.’s (2006) synthesis also found that when homework was compared with supervised in-class study in primary school, in-class study was found to be more effective in raising student achievement. The authors pointed out that few studies exist examining the effectiveness of homework in the early elementary school grades and this should be addressed in future studies.

**Table 2: Positive and negative effects of homework**

Positive Effects of Homework	Negative Effects of Homework
✓ Increases the amount of time students spend on academic tasks (Cooper et al., 2006, p.6)	✗ Homework can cause students to have negative attitudes to school (Cooper et al., 2006)
✓ The inculcation of good study habits (Cooper et al., 2006, p.6)	✗ Homework is often a source of friction between home and school (Cooper et al., 2006, p.3)
✓ Improvement in self-regulation and self-direction (Cooper et al., 2006, p.7)	✗ Doing homework can mean that students are overexposed to academic tasks (Cooper et al., 2006)

### Positive Effects of Homework

- ✓ Increases parental interest and involvement in children's schooling (Cooper et al., 2006; Williams, Swift, Williams and Van Daal, 2017).
- ✓ Students become aware of the connection between home and school (Cooper et al., 2006)
- ✓ Homework supports the development of children's self-efficacy and self-regulation (Patall, Cooper, and Robinson, 2008; Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2012).
- ✓ Homework develops children's metacognitive skills, e.g. using self-monitoring strategies and homework planning diaries (Rudman, 2014).

### Negative Effects of Homework

- ✗ Doing homework leads to physical and emotional fatigue (Cooper et al., 2006)
- ✗ Homework denies children recreation time (Cooper et al., 2006)
- ✗ Parental involvement in homework can pressurise children into doing homework meticulously to suit their standards (Cooper et al., 2006)
- ✗ Parental involvement in homework can confuse children if their interpretation of the homework task differs from the teacher's (Cooper et al., 2006)
- ✗ Parents might be tempted to over-assist or complete children's homework for them and in so doing make their children dependant, rather than independent learners (Cooper et al., 2006)
- ✗ Homework reinforces the disparity in achievement between children because children will experience different levels of homework support from parents (Cooper et al., 2006)
- ✗ A negative relationship was found between the amount of homework and student attitudes to homework (Cooper et al., 1989; Cooper, 2001).
- ✗ Homework causes children stress (Kralovec and Buell, 2001). This finding is from a meta-analysis.

The number of variables to be considered when studying the homework-achievement relationship is prodigious and complex and no simple conclusions can be construed (Cooper, 2001; Hallam, 2006; Trautwein and Lüdtke, 2009). For example, a study of 535 Spanish students in primary school (aged 9-13 years) by Valle, Regueiro, Nunez, Rodriguez, Pineiro and Rosario (2016) found that academic achievement was positively associated with the amount of homework completed; the amount of homework completed was related to homework time management; homework time management was associated with the approach to homework and the approach to homework was related to the student's academic motivation. Socio-cultural variables are also crucially important to consider, for example, children's mastery of the language in which homework is given (Bang, Suárez-Orozco and O'Connor, 2011). Socio-economic factors may also have an impact (Ndebele, 2015). Again, these findings support a bioecological conception of a child's world, characterised by multidirectional and mutually influencing factors and effects. Núñez et al. (2017) noted that although most studies on homework found that it had a beneficial effect on achievement, results of studies varied according to research design (Cooper et al., 2006; Patall et al., 2008), nature of measures (i.e., global vs. specific) (Trautwein et al., 2009), students' grade level (Núñez et al., 2015), and focus of the analysis (e.g., student variables, instructional process variables or parental involvement) (Nunez et al., 2014). Doctoroff and Arnold (2017) also identified a number of homework-related factors impacting on achievement including amount of homework, skill areas that are targeted in homework, purpose of homework, degree of choice for the student in doing homework, completion deadline, degree of individualisation of homework and the social context.

Positive outcomes for homework are predicated on the appropriateness or suitability of the homework for the child, as well as clarity of homework content and purpose

Jackson and Harbison (2014)

Cooper, Robinson and Patall's (2006) synthesis of research on homework from 1987 to 2003 was conducted in the United States and included studies with children from kindergarten to 12th grade only. This excluded preschool-aged children but includes elementary (primary) and high school (secondary) aged children, (children between five and eighteen years old). Cooper et al.'s (2006) synthesis of studies identified positive and negative effects related to homework. Positive outcomes for homework are predicated on the appropriateness or suitability of the homework for the child, as well as clarity of homework content and purpose (Jackson and Harbison, 2014). Children will be motivated to complete homework if the homework task is clear and if it coincides with their own interests (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; Trautwein et al., 2006 as cited in Rudman, 2014). Another key determinant of the efficacy of homework may be the amount and quality of parental support experienced by children, although again, consensus is hard to find in the literature.

### **Parental Involvement with Homework**

Expectations for levels and quality of parental involvement with homework are also variable. In an extensive review of the literature on parental involvement with children's homework, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) found that parents were more likely to involve themselves with their children's homework when they believed they should be involved, and that children and teachers wanted their

involvement. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) also found that one of the strongest predictors of parents' involvement with their children's homework was whether parents believed that such involvement would make a positive difference. Parents who report reasonable confidence in their ability to help with homework are more likely to be involved with it (Ames, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992), and those who help their children with their homework are more likely to believe that their help has a positive influence on their child's outcomes (Stevenson, Chen and Uttal, 1990).

Interestingly, the literature is not clear on whether or not parental help with homework does in fact contribute to children's academic outcomes. Like the Irish *Assessment of Achievement in English Reading and Maths* studies, Benner and Sadler (2016) state that homework help seems to be negatively related to academic outcomes. On the other hand, Núñez et al. (2015) showed that student homework behaviours, perceived parental homework involvement, and academic achievement are significantly related, and Williams et al. (2017) reported positive outcomes from a study that supported increased parental involvement with homework. José et al. (2017) also linked achievement and homework behaviours with perceived parental control and support behaviours about homework. Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008)'s meta-analysis of fourteen homework-related studies showed that training parents to be involved in their child's homework results in (a) higher rates of homework completion, (b) fewer homework problems, and (c) possibly, improved academic performance among elementary school children. These are encouraging outcomes for parental involvement in their children's homework. However, the word 'training' suggests that the process involving parents might be

one-way, that is, teachers instructing parents on how to support their children's homework. Current literature on parental involvement in their children's education tends to emphasise empowerment models of engagement (e.g. Kim and Bryan, 2017), aiming towards an egalitarian and perhaps reciprocal approach in relation to parent-teacher interactions, as explored from page 13.

A meta-analysis of twenty studies on homework, which looked at the relationship between parental involvement in homework and student achievement, demonstrated positive outcomes for primary school children (Patall, Cooper, and Robinson 2008). This finding relating to primary school children may feasibly be connected to the finding that close responsive parenting influences children's academic development. The meta-analysis also found that different types of parental involvement in homework have different relationships to achievement (Patall, Cooper, and Robinson 2008). However, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) note that investigators seldom clearly define concepts such as 'homework involvement' for parents and definitions in their meta-analysis ranged from checking a child's completed homework to complex patterns of attending to child understanding and scaffolding activities based on those observations. Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye (2000) found when parents supported their children's autonomous approach to homework, outcomes such as higher standardised test scores, class grades, and homework completion resulted. Direct help with homework was associated with lower test scores and class grades. Doctoroff and Arnold (2017) note that parents may require particular support in learning how to assist young children with their homework.

Direct help with homework  
was associated with lower  
test scores and class grades

**Table 3: Positive and negative effects of parental involvement in their children's homework**

**Parental Involvement in their Children's Homework**

Positive Effects	Negative Effects
✓ Accelerates learning (Epstein et al., 1997)	✗ Interference with learning (Epstein, 1988)
✓ Increases time spent studying	✗ Confusion of instructional techniques (Cooper et al., 2000)
✓ Makes homework study more efficient, effective, and focused	✗ Help beyond tutoring (Cooper et al., 2000)
✓ Enhances proximal achievement-related outcomes	✗ Emotional costs and tension (Levin et al., 1997)
✓ Improves homework completion (Cooper et al., 2000)	✗ Increased fatigue, frustration, disappointment
✓ Improves homework performance (Callahan, Rademacher and Hildreth, 1998)	✗ Increased tension between mother and child
✓ Promotes positive affect	✗ Increased pressure on student to perform well (Cooper et al., 2000)
✓ Enhances positive mood and attentiveness during homework (Leone and Richards, 1989)	✗ Increased differences between high and low achievers (McDermott, Goldman and Varenne, 1984)
✓ Enhances enjoyment during homework (Shumow, 1998)	
✓ Improves attitudes toward homework and school (Cooper et al., 1998)	
✓ Facilitates communication between parent and child (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001)	
✓ Enhanced expression of parent beliefs and expectations about school	
✓ Enhances feedback, reinforcement, or both for desired homework behaviour	
✓ Facilitates communication between parent and teacher (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001)	
✓ Improves behaviour during homework and school (Sanders, 1998)	
✓ Enhances development of self-regulation and study skills (Xu and Corno, 1998)	

(Patall, Cooper and Robinson, 2008, p. 1041)



Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) detailed, in tabular form, the positive and negative effects of parental involvement in their children's homework. The table is reproduced on page 38 as Table 3.

### Children's Voice on Homework

A trawl of relevant research on homework reveals a small number of Irish studies where primary school children's views on homework are sought<sup>3</sup>. The *National Assessments for English Reading and Maths* (Eivers et al., 2009, Kavanagh et al., 2014) included a pupil questionnaire that asked questions about Mathematics and English homework specifically but these were two of twenty-three questions not closely related to homework. A recent report by the NCCA called *Preschool to Primary School Transition Initiative* (2018) invited young pre-school children to comment on what they were looking forward to about primary school. The report found that the external signs of being a school-going child such as their school-bag, lunch and homework were important to children and they referred to them positively, seeing them as badges of their new status as school-going children (p. 25). The report quoted three homework-related comments by children, two positive and one ambiguous, as follows: "In school I am looking forward to reading and doing my homework"; "I will have homework and will be working"; "I think I want to do homework". This interest in homework on behalf of young children was also noted in O'Toole's (2016) study of transition to primary school.

Lynch's (2016) study of homework also sought the views of Irish children. Many children (53%) reported that they worry about completing their homework at least some of the time, and that they do need help from their parents (83%). However, only 15% of junior infants found their homework hard or too hard, with this figure

increasing to 34% in 5th and 6th class. In similar findings to NCCA (2018) and O'Toole (2016), children in this study enjoyed doing their homework in the junior classes (74%), but enjoyed it less as they got older, with only 51% of 5th and 6th class children expressing enjoyment. Of the group of children who received extra help in Maths and English at school, 57% said that homework supported their learning, but among those who did not require additional help in school, this figure rose to 66%.

### Recommendations Regarding Homework Based on the Research Literature

According to Hayward (2010, p. 63), "Giving homework does not result in greater student achievement. Giving well-planned, purposeful, and engaging homework is more likely to affect student achievement in a positive way". A review of the research literature yields a number of interesting recommendations for teachers on how to ensure that the homework they set is well-planned, purposeful and engaging. It is recommended that teachers use a metacognitive approach to homework, do not grade homework and make homework fun (Felicello, 2018). Teachers should make available several kinds of homework instructions along with various types of homework assignments to meet specific learners' needs (Hong and Milgram, 2000) and interests (Felicello, 2018; Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; Trautwein et al., 2006), because according to Rudman (2014), if homework is planned to meet students' individual learning styles, it is more effective as a learning tool. Vatterot (2017) asked students to create their own homework assignments and self-monitor their progress, and showed that personalised homework like this can work. Individualised homework develops learner confidence and allows students to be in control of their own learning (Vatterot,

<sup>3</sup> Clerkin (2016) studied 5500 secondary school students (third year to sixth year) in a representative sample of 20 Irish schools on their self-reported homework and study behaviours.

...‘real life’ assignments,  
and the use of homework  
planners and getting pupils  
to keep their own record of  
homework completion are  
also effective homework  
strategies for low  
achieving children

Rudman (2014)

2017). However, as with much of the literature on homework, there are dissenting voices and Cooper’s (1989) research into home-based learning concluded that individualising homework assignments had a minimal effect on pupil achievement but added substantially to teachers’ workloads (as cited in Rudman, 2014). One of the most effective homework strategies amongst children who are low achievers is to give ‘real life’ assignments, and the use of homework planners and getting pupils to keep their own record of homework completion are also effective homework strategies for low achieving children (Rudman, 2014). Williams et al. (2017) also recommend situating homework in everyday contexts. Interactive assignments are more suited to children than pedestrian repetitive tasks (Van Voorhis, 2004). Dialogue between parents and teachers about homework could give clarity to expectations around homework and might lead to a shared vision about the purpose of homework (Rudman, 2014). Parent-teacher collaboration and parent-training workshops may improve the quality of parental involvement in their children’s homework (Cunha, Rosário, Macedo, Nunes, Fuentes, Pinto, and Suárez, 2015), but this again comes with the caution that attempts to engage with parents must be mindful of the reality of busy family lives with a variety of cultural norms. Homework should be “more experiential, more collaborative and more oriented to opportunities offered by families, communities

and environments if it is to be designed with ‘enrichment’ in mind” (Gill and Shlossman, 2000, p.50).

A review of the literature on homework also yields recommendations for future research. Gaps in the literature include a dearth of studies on homework in primary schools, particularly in the Irish context and a lack of information on the benefits of homework in relation to young children in primary school, especially those in the early years of primary school. Inconclusive findings in relation to the benefits of homework for younger children, indicates the need for further probing. The role of parents in homework must be voluntary, respectful, and individualised, and the value of family life must be honoured (Vatterot, 2009). Traditionally schools have controlled how parents interacted with them and a cautionary word should be made that practices to foster home-school links are acts of collaboration rather than colonisation (Edwards and Warin, 1999). Therefore, power relationships between schools and parents must be addressed in order to embrace parents as equal partners in their child’s education. Future research must also bear in mind that parents are not a homogenous group and parents may think differently about homework depending on their experience of their children’s schools and their own culture and experience.

The literature on homework suggests that the key to academic success does not rely on the amount of homework done, but rather on how students engage on homework (Trautwein et al., 2009; Núñez et al., 2015c), and on how homework engagement is related with student motivation (Martin, 2012). Wilby (2013) describes how in Finland, a country that consistently features at the top of education league tables, fifteen year old children

do no more than thirty minutes homework a night. Rudman (2014) opines that:

Learning how to meet the homework needs of our children and families and how to offer appropriate differentiation, routine and structure in those tasks can only come about through findings derived from small-scale, qualitative research projects exploring the particular issues and challenges within each individual learning community (p. 25). It would appear that this is the next move in relation to research in Ireland on homework. In short, more 'homework' needs to be done on homework.

### **Exo-system and Macro-system**

According to the bioecological model, decisions made and supports developed in arenas that may never be accessed by children and families may still impact on their individual experiences (exo-system), as do broader societal considerations and developments (macro-system). Such government-level and policy-level decisions can have important implications for parental involvement, engagement and partnership.

### **Supports available to families through schools, communities, relevant agencies and policy-making**

A bioecological perspective locates the experiences of individual children, families and schools within the communities in which they are based. Recent literature on parental partnerships has begun to take a more bioecological approach, recommending school-community partnerships (Stefanski, Valli and Jacobson, 2016; Valli, Stefanski and Jacobson, 2018). Within such school-community partnerships, schools expand their traditional educational focus to include health and social services for children and families and to involve the broader community, enhancing student learning, strengthening schools and

## Recent literature on parental partnerships has begun to take a more bioecological approach, recommending school-community partnerships

Stefanski, Valli and Jacobson (2016)

Valli, Stefanski and Jacobson (2018)

supporting neighbourhoods (Valli et al., 2018). O'Toole's (2016) study of parental involvement noted the importance of coordination between the various agencies whose remit is related to children and families, to feed into the complex web of support available to them, and encourage optimal educational outcomes. She recommended 'joined-up thinking' by the various agencies supporting children and families and encouraging parental involvement in collaboration with schools, but noted that this must be facilitated by government departments and funding providers, so that organisations and people aiming to achieve similar outcomes are not put in the position of having to compete for funding. The most obviously influential of such approaches in Ireland is the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Scheme which provides extensive initiatives relevant to parental involvement, such as the Home-School-Community-Liaison scheme. However, this is available only in schools that have been designated as 'disadvantaged' and so is explored in detail on page 55/56, where the impact of socio-economic factors on parental involvement are deconstructed. Some other approaches and strategies that have been shown to be effective nationally and internationally include the Area-Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, Partnership Schools Ireland and the Families and Schools Together (FAST) Programme.

### *Area-Based Childhood Programme*

This programme is a cross-departmental initiative and is administered by Pobal and the Centre for Effective Services.

It is co-funded by the Irish Government (through the DCYA) and Atlantic Philanthropies, and it targets investment in evidence-informed interventions which directly impact on improving outcomes for children, young people and their families living in some of the most disadvantaged areas in the country ([https://www.pobal.ie/FundingProgrammes/Area%20Based%20Childhood%20\(ABC\)%20Programme/Pages/default.aspx](https://www.pobal.ie/FundingProgrammes/Area%20Based%20Childhood%20(ABC)%20Programme/Pages/default.aspx)). The main focus of the programme intersects between education, health and social outcomes with particular emphasis on the improvement of services to meet needs across these indicators. The integration of effective services to improve children's development, well-being, parenting and educational disadvantage in tackling aspects of child poverty is of particular concern. Interventions, which have been evidenced as having a direct impact on improving children's outcomes across domains, are integrated into mainstream services such as health, education and the Child and Family Agency. Previous initiatives funded through the earlier model (Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP), such as YoungBallymun, Preparing for Life and the Childhood Development Initiative, have demonstrated the effectiveness in targeted initiatives for improving children's outcomes associated with child behaviour, parenting, child health and development and learning. The 13 areas included in the ABC programme are listed in Appendix 1.

#### *Partnership Schools Ireland*

Another interesting scheme with relevance to parental involvement, engagement and partnership is 'Partnership Schools Ireland'. A joint venture between the National Parents Council Primary (NPC) and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), this scheme commenced in Ireland in 2014. Widely used in the USA, Scotland and Australia the notion of Action Team Partnerships have been used in number of schools in Ireland to develop one year action plans which focus on academic, well-being

These schools cover all types, contexts, cultural, racial and socio-economic groups. All of the activities reported resulted increased parental involvement in the partnership schools

and partnership goals. These teams are representative of all of the partners in schools and to date seventeen schools have gotten involved in the scheme. The success of a sister scheme in the U.S. indicates that there is great potential in the Partnership Schools model. The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) based at Johns Hopkins University and led by Joyce Epstein has membership across all school types in fifteen states. Each year the NNPS publishes a document outlining ideas to improve school – family – community links. The 2017 document entitled *Promising Partnership Practices* (Thomas, Greenfield, Ames, Hine and Epstein, 2017) features 77 activities designed and implemented by network schools. These schools cover all types, contexts, cultural, racial and socio-economic groups. All of the activities reported resulted increased parental involvement in the partnership schools.

#### *Families and Schools Together (FAST)*

FAST is an eight week structured and evidence-based parenting programme which, whilst originally aimed at low-income families in the USA, has been used extensively in a number of countries with groups with traditionally low engagement rates. These groups vary from country to country, in Australia for example in the Northern Territory the programme targets Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families but in New South Wales newcomer families are the focus. FAST is used successfully in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, UK, Germany and The Netherlands. In the UK, the NGO Save the Children funds the initiative in schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. According to the programme's website ([www.familiesandschoolstogether.com](http://www.familiesandschoolstogether.com)) all participating schools in the UK saw a rise in parental

involvement amongst participating families after programme completion. This increase in parental involvement ranges from just 3% in Northern Ireland to 33% in Wales. This data is supported by the work of McDonald, Fitzroy, Fuchs, Fookien and Klasen (2012) who investigated retention rates for the FAST programme amongst low-income families in the USA, UK, Holland and Germany. In order to graduate from the FAST programme, families must attend six or more of the eight programme weeks. Results from this study showed retention rates of 83% in the UK and Holland and 89% in Germany. FAST had an already established retention rate of 80% in the USA. One of the key components of the programme is that 'graduated' families become part of the training team for the next cohort of 'FAST families' and also take part in monthly meetings with other 'graduated' families and therefore maintain their engagement with the school community on an ongoing basis. FAST targets all of the families in a class or school level, so up to forty families can take part in one eight week programme. The international success and the scalability of the FAST programme certainly mean that it warrants further investigation for possible use in the Irish context.

### Implications for Curriculum Development

In recent years, the role of parents has become more central to curriculum development in Ireland. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework which was published by the NCCA in October 2009. Aistear supports children's learning and development from birth to six years and can be used by parents and by practitioners in the range of early childhood settings, including infant classes in primary schools. It draws on the work of Epstein (2009), and its guidelines focus on four ways in which parents can engage with their children's early learning and development:

1. Supporting learning and development (providing information to support learning and development at home)
2. Sharing information (ensuring good communication between home and pre-school/school setting and vice versa)
3. Contributing to the setting (parents sharing time, experience, talents with the pre-school/school)
4. Making decisions and advocating different courses of action (for their own child, for the school/pre-school, for children in general).

The role of parents is less explicitly visible in the primary school curriculum (NCCA, 1999), but the NCCA / NPC (2017) point out that in reality primary schools and parents work together in a number of different ways, for example open days before children transition to school and information sessions on the curriculum at the beginning of each year. All schools must do parent-teacher meetings at least once a year, and there is also a requirement for a written report (Hall et al., 2008). NCCA provide report templates for teachers to use in communicating with parents (<https://www.ncca.ie/en/primary/reporting-and-transfer/report-card-templatescreator>). Most Irish schools involve parents in Boards of Management and in Parents Associations and parents are often asked to help out with fundraising or going on trips (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010). Schools often use ICT and social media such as Facebook to communicate with parents – “using blogs and class websites to share what the children are learning, using these to inform parents about children's homework, sharing the poem or song of the week, and generally communicating about the work of the school” (NCCA / NPC, 2017, p. 14).

However, while many initiatives in recent years draw on the understanding that parents are hugely important in their children's learning, the currently available research specifically relating to direct parental involvement in

to date, parents' voice has been largely under-represented in development groups who are central to future developments in national curricula

developing curriculum is somewhat limited. The findings of research into parental involvement in school improvement and school leadership present useful conclusions which may be transferrable. NCCA have responsibility for curriculum development in Ireland, and conduct this work through engagement with research evidence, deliberations at council level, engagement in consultation with the public, educational settings and institutions and other interested parties, and engagement with networks of schools and early childhood settings (<https://www.ncca.ie/en/about-curriculum/about-ncca/what-we-do>). Given this partnership model of curriculum development currently in use in Ireland, an increased level of parental involvement in this area may be feasible. The National Parents Council (NPC) has representation on various committees and boards in the NCCA, with two representatives on Council and one on each of the over-arching boards. However, to date, parents' voice has been largely under-represented in development groups who are central to future developments in national curricula. This echoes the findings of studies such as those conducted by Blackmore and Hutchinson (2010), Steimach and Preston (2008), Bridge (2001) and Johansson (2009), which point to the ambiguity that exists around the place of parents in areas such as curriculum development, school improvement and school leadership/management. This is an issue both for parents and educators and the collaboration between the two. The Home-School-Community-Liaison Scheme already in operation in DEIS schools (and explored in detail on page 55/56) gives some direction in terms of a possible framework for navigating these issues at local level. At national

level there may be a need for a structure similar to the Professional Learning Communities or Primary School Networks already being used to great effect with teachers.

The need to capacity-build amongst parents in order to facilitate their involvement in similar ways to teachers may be done through the use of projects similar to an American parent leadership development project known as 'Parents as Collaborative Leaders' (PACL) (Shepherd and Kervick, 2016). PACL was a two year project which provided training on leadership for thirty-two parents across ten states. The parents were provided with three days of training facilitated by staff from both universities and parent assistance centres. The third day focused on the design and implementation of a personalised internship experience for the parents. These internships were at local, state and national level and ranged from setting up parent support group to sitting on state advisory committees and boards. The success of the participants' engagement across all levels of policy development indicate that it may be prudent to expand current ideas around parent leadership and engagement in the curriculum development process.

Another way of encouraging more direct parent engagement with curriculum development is to encourage schools/settings to have parents involved in the planning of curricula which are either culture or context based. Bridge (2001) found that parents' work and family commitments often prevented them from being present in the pre-school setting and thus acted as a barrier to their involvement. The pre-school setting in Bridge's action research project uses the Highscope curriculum and the practitioners utilised the 'Plan – Do – Review' component to increase parental involvement. By asking parents to engage in the planning phase at home with



their children the practitioners found that the children became engaged in play which was based on their own lives. The children's family life and cultures were brought into the setting in a very tangible way without parents/ siblings needing to be physically present. Bridge noted that "Parent-child planning showed that children regularly learn through their real life relationships and experiences. These are very powerful learning resources that are generally under-used in the preschool curriculum" (2001, p. 18). Such support for curriculum development may also go some way to addressing the concern with school-led, unicultural approaches to parental involvement that are highlighted within a bioecological framework.

Johansson (2009) investigated the Sami curriculum in two of the six Sami schools in Sweden. 90% of the parents in the study had not received any information about the Sami curriculum from either local or national bodies prior to the study and believed that this was a barrier to their engagement with schools around this culture-based curriculum. Teachers and parents formed working groups and focused on themes within the curriculum and identified cultural activities which would support the development of these themes. As a result of the increased use of various cultural expression to mediate the curriculum the study notes that pupils were spending more time in their community, showing more enthusiasm for their school work which was now contextualised in their daily lives and that parents, teachers and community members increased their

The children's family life and cultures were brought into the setting in a very tangible way without parents/ siblings needing to be physically present

social capital through partnership. With the increasing needs of schools to address cultural diversity this Swedish model gives some food for thought.

There is international evidence that lack of knowledge about the curriculum is not solely a Swedish problem, and parents sometimes feel ignorant of the curriculum and processes in school in many countries (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents in Ireland tend to be particularly concerned about their ability to support their children's homework in the subject areas of Mathematics and Gaeilge (Irish language) (INTO, 1997). This may be particularly evident where children take part in 'immersion education', learning through Irish, when their parents do not speak the language (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013). This highlights the importance of availability of easily accessible, comprehensive and jargon-free information on curriculum for parents, in a variety of languages and formats. In the Irish context, many such resources are provided by the NCCA and NPC.

#### **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and National Parents Council Primary (NPC) Supports for Parental Involvement**

The NCCA acknowledge the key role parents play in their children's learning and currently provide a range of resources to help support children's learning across the primary school continuum. The resources<sup>4</sup>, which provide the what and why of children's learning, as well as providing guidelines on supporting home learning, are presented in Table 4 (see page 46). The National Parents Council strive to ensure that parents are supported and empowered to become effective partners in their children's learning. This is achieved in terms of information and support provided to parents on their website and their engagement in a collaborative project

<sup>4</sup> Many of the resources are available in various languages

**Table 4: NCCA Resources for Parents**

**NCCA INFORMATION FOR PARENTS – PRIMARY**

**The What, Why and How of Children’s Learning in Primary School**

<b>Infant Classes</b>	<p>Booklet <b>Helping your child in junior and senior infants</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1406/helping_your_child_in_junior_and_senior_infants.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1406/helping_your_child_in_junior_and_senior_infants.pdf</a></p> <p>Video <b>Early Learning and Junior and Senior Infants</b>  <a href="http://www.ncca.biz/dvd/english.html">http://www.ncca.biz/dvd/english.html</a></p> <p>Tip Sheet <b>Learning and developing through play</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1136/tipsheet_play_parents_of_young_children.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1136/tipsheet_play_parents_of_young_children.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Structure of the Primary School Curriculum</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1425/the_what_why_and_how_of_childrens_learning_in_primary_school_overview.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1425/the_what_why_and_how_of_childrens_learning_in_primary_school_overview.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Primary School Curriculum Guidelines for Parents</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1430/your_childs_learning_2000.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1430/your_childs_learning_2000.pdf</a></p>
<b>1st &amp; 2nd Class</b>	<p>Booklet <b>Helping your child in 1st and 2nd class</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1405/helping_your_child_in_first_and_second_classes.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1405/helping_your_child_in_first_and_second_classes.pdf</a></p> <p>Video <b>1st and 2nd Class</b>  <a href="http://www.ncca.biz/dvd/english.html">http://www.ncca.biz/dvd/english.html</a></p> <p><b>Primary School Curriculum Guidelines for Parents</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1430/your_childs_learning_2000.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1430/your_childs_learning_2000.pdf</a></p>
<b>3rd &amp; 4th Class</b>	<p>Booklet <b>Helping your child in 3rd and 4th class</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1407/helping_your_child_in_third_and_fourth_classes.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1407/helping_your_child_in_third_and_fourth_classes.pdf</a></p> <p>Video <b>3rd and 4th Class</b>  <a href="http://www.ncca.biz/dvd/english.html">http://www.ncca.biz/dvd/english.html</a></p> <p><b>Structure of the Primary School Curriculum</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1425/the_what_why_and_how_of_childrens_learning_in_primary_school_overview.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1425/the_what_why_and_how_of_childrens_learning_in_primary_school_overview.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Primary School Curriculum Guidelines for Parents</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1430/your_childs_learning_2000.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1430/your_childs_learning_2000.pdf</a></p>
<b>5th &amp; 6th Class</b>	<p>Booklet <b>Helping your children in 5th and 6th class</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/2810/helping_your_child_in_fifth_and_sixth_classes.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/2810/helping_your_child_in_fifth_and_sixth_classes.pdf</a></p> <p>Video <b>5th and 6th Class</b>  <a href="http://www.ncca.biz/dvd/english.html">http://www.ncca.biz/dvd/english.html</a></p> <p><b>Structure of the Primary School Curriculum</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1425/the_what_why_and_how_of_childrens_learning_in_primary_school_overview.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1425/the_what_why_and_how_of_childrens_learning_in_primary_school_overview.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Primary School Curriculum Guidelines for Parents</b>  <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1430/your_childs_learning_2000.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1430/your_childs_learning_2000.pdf</a></p>

## MATHEMATICS

<b>Infant Classes</b>	<b>Glossary of terms to support the Mathematics Primary School Curriculum</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1404/glossary_of_mathematical_terms.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1404/glossary_of_mathematical_terms.pdf</a>
<b>1st &amp; 2nd Class</b>	<b>Tip sheet – Helping you child with subtraction</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1439/tipsheet_helping_you_child_with_subtraction_tens_units.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1439/tipsheet_helping_you_child_with_subtraction_tens_units.pdf</a> <b>Glossary of terms to support the Mathematics Primary School Curriculum</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1404/glossary_of_mathematical_terms.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1404/glossary_of_mathematical_terms.pdf</a>
<b>3rd &amp; 4th Class</b>	<b>Tip sheet – Helping your Children with Division</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1438/tipsheet_helping-your-child-with-division.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1438/tipsheet_helping-your-child-with-division.pdf</a> <b>Presentation – Division as Sharing</b> <a href="http://www.ncca.biz/division/index.htm">http://www.ncca.biz/division/index.htm</a> <b>Glossary of Terms to Support the Mathematics Primary School Curriculum</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1404/glossary_of_mathematical_terms.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1404/glossary_of_mathematical_terms.pdf</a>
<b>5th &amp; 6th Class</b>	<b>Glossary of Terms to Support the Mathematics Primary School Curriculum</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1404/glossary_of_mathematical_terms.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1404/glossary_of_mathematical_terms.pdf</a>

## LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

<b>Infant Classes</b>	<b>Tip Sheet – Helping your Child to Read and Write</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1132/tipsheet_for_parents_literacy.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1132/tipsheet_for_parents_literacy.pdf</a>
	<b>Information Sheets for Parents on the New Language Curriculum</b> <a href="http://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/96b88c3e-0047-40df-b02b-e64422051d32/Primary-Language-Curriculum_Parents_1-page.pdf">http://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/96b88c3e-0047-40df-b02b-e64422051d32/Primary-Language-Curriculum_Parents_1-page.pdf</a>

## STARTING POST PRIMARY SCHOOL

<b>Primary to Post Primary</b>	<b>Glossary of mathematical terms for 5th/6th Class in Primary and Junior Cycle – Bridging Materials for Mathematics</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1409/maths_glossary_5th_6th.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1409/maths_glossary_5th_6th.pdf</a> <b>Transition from Primary to Post-Primary</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle">https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle</a> <b>Fact Sheets – Information about the Different Subjects Available at Junior Cycle</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/subjects-in-development">https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/subjects-in-development</a> <b>Understanding Standardised Scores</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1429/understanding-standardscores_eng.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1429/understanding-standardscores_eng.pdf</a> <b>Understanding STen Scores</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1400/english_tip_sheet_sten.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1400/english_tip_sheet_sten.pdf</a> <b>School Reports Information Sheet</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/media/1432/your_childs_school_report_parents.pdf">https://www.ncca.ie/media/1432/your_childs_school_report_parents.pdf</a> <b>The Education Passport</b> <a href="https://www.ncca.ie/en/primary/reporting-and-transfer/education-passport">https://www.ncca.ie/en/primary/reporting-and-transfer/education-passport</a>
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**Table 5: NPC Resources for Parents: Note NPC is currently designing a new website so these links may differ**

National Parents Council Resources Supporting Parental Engagement in Home Learning	
<b>Information leaflet on the Partnership Schools Ireland initiative</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/12d8e4d6-3fe5-4fb1-9f9b-096fd082b426.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/12d8e4d6-3fe5-4fb1-9f9b-096fd082b426.pdf</a>
<b>Supporting your Child's Learning at Home</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/61c89cf9-820f-4de8-a9d3-9880f2bbd7d5.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/61c89cf9-820f-4de8-a9d3-9880f2bbd7d5.pdf</a>
<b>Making the Transition from Early Education to Primary Education</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/6053bf45-0996-498a-a38c-9aa823816e0c.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/6053bf45-0996-498a-a38c-9aa823816e0c.pdf</a>
<b>Supporting your Child's move from Primary to Post-Primary School</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/0ca40e4c-9274-4b4a-a0a0-6fa19f99a688.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/0ca40e4c-9274-4b4a-a0a0-6fa19f99a688.pdf</a>
<b>Bullying</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/600b48a5-90f3-4d5e-acc6-baa870d785b6.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/600b48a5-90f3-4d5e-acc6-baa870d785b6.pdf</a>
<b>Homework</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/3b19a148-cddc-4d73-8185-90419641423a.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/3b19a148-cddc-4d73-8185-90419641423a.pdf</a>
<b>What is a parent association?</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/0889af87-8bad-4a3c-8223-9a65304a3199.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/0889af87-8bad-4a3c-8223-9a65304a3199.pdf</a>
<b>Parent associations and money</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/90867b7f-e9e7-46d5-aa84-2b4486ed241d.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/90867b7f-e9e7-46d5-aa84-2b4486ed241d.pdf</a>
<b>Getting involved in your child's education</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/21196d07-39c1-40c6-9600-395fe20c3774.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/21196d07-39c1-40c6-9600-395fe20c3774.pdf</a>
<b>Information on supporting children's learning – Special Educational Needs</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/sen.aspx">http://www.npc.ie/sen.aspx</a>
<b>Working effectively as a parent association</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/e68cbc61-8643-4772-b405-4a732b037ad1.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/e68cbc61-8643-4772-b405-4a732b037ad1.pdf</a>
<b>Supporting each other: A guide to best practice for the effective partnership between Principals and Parent Associations (in collaboration with the IPPN)</b>	<a href="http://www.npc.ie/attachments/be6b9b55-695d-4cce-9fc6-690b108e07b5.pdf">http://www.npc.ie/attachments/be6b9b55-695d-4cce-9fc6-690b108e07b5.pdf</a>

(Partnership Schools Ireland) with the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) focussed on creating meaningful partnerships between teachers, parents and the wider school community. Table 5 (above) presents some of the resources available to parents on the NPC website providing information directly related to supporting children's home learning.

This exploration of the contexts in which parental involvement occurs in Ireland shows how factors at exo- and macro-level can impact on individual micro-systems. However, the bioecological perspective also acknowledges that the effects of contextual factors are mediated by time, both personal and socio-historical.

## The Importance of 'Time'

**Personal Time** *Changes in parental involvement, engagement and partnership as children progress through school systems.*

It would seem that the level of parental engagement expected or sought changes over time. Parents tend to be more involved in their children's education at pre-school and primary level, but involvement decreases as children grow older (Daniel, 2015), and is at its lowest level for children of secondary school age (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). This is in spite of evidence that parental involvement is advantageous for children of all ages (Cox, 2005; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Parents may be more intimidated by secondary schools than primary or pre-schools, viewing them as large, bureaucratic organisations that are not welcoming to parents (Eccles and Harrold, 1993). Metso (2004) found that as children progress through schooling systems, contact with their families decreases, and as they reach the senior stages of education, schools tend to distance themselves from parents by contacting them less frequently. More recent research however noted similar levels of engagement at both primary and secondary level (O'Toole, 2016), although the types of involvement may change over time, with parents of secondary school children occupying a more 'stage setting' role (Harris and Robinson, 2016) and parents of primary and pre-school children being more directly involved (O'Toole, 2016). It may also be that the wishes of children can be misinterpreted as they get older – while it is true that older children tend to want to become more independent of their parents, they may still desire and benefit from their parents' involvement in their education, particularly in terms of help with homework and subject choices (Deslandes and Cloutier, 2002; O'Toole, 2016).

## Socio-Historical Time

*Changing norms around parental involvement over time.*

Norms of parental involvement may also change over time in the socio-historical sense. Traditionally, models of parental involvement were largely used to support the (often taken-for-granted) value system of the school, and any collective action on behalf of parents was focussed on fund-raising rather than changing the school's way of doing things (Munn, 1993). This traditional model of teacher as expert and parent as passive may no longer be acceptable to the majority of parents (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), and there is definite evidence of changing parental attitudes to and expectations of their children's schools (Bastiani, 1993; O'Toole, 2016). In recent times, parents are more likely to be viewed and to view themselves as 'consumers' or 'customers' of the school, and to expect a say in how their child's education is constructed (Bastiani, 1993). While critiques of such business models of education abound (Lynch, Grummel and Devine, 2012; Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013), one positive outcome appears to be a shift away from passive attitudes of deference and helplessness on behalf of parents interacting with schools, and more recognition of their rights in terms of provision of information, some basic opportunities for access and even some input into formal decision-making (Bastiani, 1993; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Certainly from the perspective of legislation and policy-making, there has been a growing emphasis internationally on parental involvement in their children's education in recent years, and that is certainly the case in Ireland. According to INTO (1997), modern Irish education has

...modern Irish education has its roots in systems that depended on the interests of parents and the support provided by them

its roots in systems that depended on the interests of parents and the support provided by them. However, with independence and the subsequent dominance of Church and State in Irish education, the role of parents (and in fact the roles of teachers and children) in educational policy dwindled to little or nothing, and parents were effectively removed from centre stage to outside the school gates (Coolahan, 1988). For example, by the 1930's parents were excluded from any involvement in the management of schools by rules indicating that no lay-people could be involved in Boards of Management of schools (INTO, 1997). For many years, publicly stated policy recognised and upheld parental rights to be involved in the education, but practical barriers were continually erected against that involvement, so that "parental rights and involvement in education were little more than a flag of convenience to be embraced and discarded as opportunities arose" (INTO, 1997, p. 3).

This state of affairs began to change a little in keeping with the educational reforms of the late 1960's, although until well into the 1970's, the emphasis was on parents understanding the system rather than attempting to influence it (Griffin, 1991). Important changes occurred in 1975 when parental representation on Boards of Management was sanctioned, and in 1985 when the

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National Parents Council Primary was established with the aim of involving parents in the formation of educational policy making for schools. At time of writing, they are currently engaged in developing supports for parents of children in early childhood education, having received funding from DCYA to develop a help-line for parents of young children, training for parents around transition from preschool to primary school, and to develop a section on their website for early childhood education. According to INTO (1997), from this point onwards, the development of parents' roles in education in Ireland became apparent on a local and national level. The potential role of parents, not just as consumers of a service but rather as interested partners in the education process began to be recognised in Ireland, and by 1991 the Department of Education was actively promoting partnership for parents in education as a stated policy aim of government (INTO, 1997). In 1995 a White Paper was published which enunciated parental rights and responsibilities in the area of education, and increasingly educational policy in Ireland has "moved parents from the position of excluded and isolated spectators outside the school gates to a position where they are becoming centrally involved in the education of their children" (INTO, 1997, p. 11).

This culminated in a flurry of educational legislation in Ireland, much of which emphasised the involvement of parents in their children's education. The Education Act (1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Need (EPSEN) Act (2004) both emphasise the involvement of parents in the education of their children. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) also emphasises the critical role of parents in their children's education. Irish approaches are consistent with legislative and policy direction in many countries, and



there is also evidence internationally that such legislative emphases may indeed have successfully trickled through to the level of practice – as Mallett (1997, p. 30) puts it:

Over time there has been a progression from seeing parents as a potential hindrance to professionals (specialists who alone know what is best for the child) through considering them as a possible source of assistance to these 'experts', to realising they are central figures of responsibility in a child's life and therefore protagonists in the task of meeting their needs.

However, vestiges of approaches and structures (such as inflexible timetabling for example) that traditionally characterised educational settings may still remain today, and schools must be careful to match the reality of their practices to the rhetoric of their ideals (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Steimach and Preston found that there existed "a persistent division of labour between parents and principals that prevented a reconceptualization of the parental role" (2008, p. 59). Equally, while legislation espouses the importance of parental involvement in education, current economic pressures may be influencing the reality of implementation of these ideals, as identified by the work of Elder (1998). Increasingly, schools are becoming dependent on parents in terms of practical support, financial contributions and fundraising (Bastiani, 1993) and home-school relationships may be dominated by such issues. The INTO's (1997) research into parental involvement in education in Ireland found that parents in some under-funded schools were loath to become involved in the life of the school because they believed that they would soon be asked to fundraise. In June 2013 a report of the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social

Protection on back-to-school costs indicated that so-called 'voluntary' financial contributions sought from parents were imposing prohibitive burdens on many families. This is important because Gilleece's (2015) work found that parental engagement with children's learning is what makes the difference, not activities like fundraising. Nevertheless, more recent research has found that openness to parental involvement in education has increased in recent years, with parents feeling and objectively being more involved in the lives of schools (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018; O'Toole, 2016).

There are also increasing demands for education to meet the perceived needs of the employment market, and educational practices, such as attempts to support parental involvement, may be in the position of having to justify their share of available funding through measures such as national tests of literacy and numeracy (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). While educational funding in Ireland is not currently linked to literacy and numeracy scores in schools, a shift towards more neo-liberal approaches has been noted (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole, 2013). Bastiani (1993) maintains that in such climates, programmes aimed at supporting parental involvement in their children's education may be disadvantaged because of their emphasis on long-term rather than short-term goals. He also maintains that the growing financial dependence of schools on parents' contributions and fundraising exacerbates pre-existing inequalities of provision between schools and neighbourhoods. As such, researchers working on developing parental involvement in their children's education through a bioecological model must consider the socio-cultural time in which their work is rooted and policy direction must equally take account of these issues.

# Effective strategies for enhancing partnerships between parents and schools when extra support may be needed

According to Fan, Li and Sandoval (2018), much research on parental involvement, engagement and partnership fails to recognise the complexity of the processes involved, and the mutually interactive and confounding effects of the factors influencing positive or negative outcomes. The use of the bioecological model as a framework for the current literature review allows us to address this criticism, because it posits a fluid, dynamic understanding of complex interactions. In spite of the attempt to structure the literature within the framework of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time' factors, there remain some factors that are relevant to the perspectives of all four elements, reflective of the interactive nature of the bioecological model. Therefore, we now present analysis of specific factors that may influence the quality of all of them. In particular, a key element of a bioecological perspective on parental involvement is the recognition of the importance of a consideration of diversity. A significant flaw in the literature on parental involvement is the tendency to treat all 'parents' as the same, and expect similar behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, regardless of individual and broader societal factors that impact on capacity to become involved in children's education (O'Toole, 2016). Interventions designed to support children and families that are based on conceptions of individual children, families, teachers, schools and communities as largely the same or similar may, at best, be doomed to failure, or at worst exacerbate existing difficulties and inequalities (Antony-Newman, 2018), but a bioecological perspective allows us to examine such

issues and develop appropriate strategies to respond appropriately to individual needs (Hayes et al., 2017). Here we explore the influence of diversity and specific issues and strategies with relevance for children with special educational needs, children from disadvantaged communities, children with English as an additional language and children from ethnic minorities. Another important consideration with regards to diversity in parental involvement is gender, as mothers tend to be more involved than fathers. These explorations note the influence and interactions between factors related to 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time'.

## **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN)**

A learning difficulty or disability can in some cases facilitate 'process' between home and school in Ireland, since legislation such as the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) requires parents to have the opportunity to contribute to the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). However, Goldman and Burke (2017) identify the need for further research to examine and promote the involvement of parents of children with SEN in aspects of school life beyond IEP's, maintaining that the majority of the research on parental involvement, engagement and partnership fails to address the specific needs of this group of parents. Bringing up a child with a disability can, however rewarding, sometimes be challenging too, and often parents of children with disabilities seek additional support from schools and teachers because they need it in their own right

(Hegarty, 2003). On the other hand, according to Seligman (2000), learning difficulties and disabilities can sometimes lead to conflict between parents and teachers, particularly where there is disagreement around academic ability, or where teachers want more support from parents in backing up their approaches at home. Equally, when children develop a reputation for the challenging behaviour that sometimes coincides with SEN, it can reduce their parents' willingness to go into schools "for fear of getting more bad news" (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011, p. 44). When schools use approaches such as suspension or expulsion, conflict with parents becomes almost inevitable (Parsons, 1999).

This obviously impacts on the extent and nature of parents' involvement in their children's education. Schools that are successful in involving the parents of children with SEN emphasise open and transparent communication about topics beyond simply behavioural or other difficulties, timely applications for supports such as Special Needs Assistants and Assistive Technology and building personal relationships of trust (O'Toole, 2016). It is also important that schools consider the needs of children who are 'exceptionally able' and involve their parents in planning for their educational needs (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

## **SOCIO-ECONOMICS**

While there is long-standing evidence of the impact of socio-economics on educational experiences for children (Benner et al., 2016; Bourdieu, 1997; Brooker, 2008; Harris and Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014), in recent years this factor has been identified as relevant to parental involvement in that education (Benner et al., 2016; Daniel, 2015; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Kim and Bryan, 2017; O'Toole, 2016). Socio-economic issues

may impact on parents' capacity to contribute meaningfully to their child's education. In fact socio-economic status has repeatedly been identified in the literature as a mediating factor in the relationship between parental involvement and children's achievement (Gilliece, 2015; Harris and Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014). Hegarty (1993) gives the following illustrative example:

Mary Smith and John Jones are parents of pupils at Elm Vale Secondary School. Both pupils have special educational needs. Mary, a consultant paediatrician, sits on the school governing body and is an extremely articulate member. John is a long-term unemployed labourer who left school at fifteen and can barely read. To say that relations between home and school are likely to be very different in the two households is to state the blindingly obvious (p. 117).

In spite of this, much of the literature refers to 'parents' unproblematically (Harris and Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014), and according to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), the rhetoric in the literature on parental involvement in education is filtered through a bias of white, middle-class values which emphasises the types of involvement favoured by this dominant group. As noted above, this may be problematic with regards to approaches that rely on 'home learning environment' also. Reay (1998) presents an analysis of parental involvement in education whereby the cultural capital possessed by middle-class parents matches that generally valued by schools. Teachers often view poor families as under-valuing education, and being disinterested in their children's education (Robinson and Harris, 2014). They develop deficit models,

characterising certain working-class parents as 'uninvolved' and apathetic (Mulkerrins, 2007).

However, according to Hornby and Lafaele (2011) the reality is that working-class parents are often aware of the difference between their cultural capital and that which is possessed and valued by schools and teachers. This can lead to feelings of intimidation for parents; working class parents, rather than choosing to be uninvolved, may be reluctant to visit the school because they do not feel confident in dealing with teachers (Mulkerrins, 2007). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) point out that parents who are without university degrees can sometimes be intimidated by teachers who they know are better academically qualified than them and therefore can be reluctant to work closely with them or to make suggestions.

It may be that the traditional Irish class structure feeds into these feelings of intimidation, with the school 'master' occupying a traditionally powerful position in Irish society (O'Toole, 2016). Irish working-class parents interviewed by Mulkerrins (2007) identified difficulties in developing comfortable and meaningful relationships with some teachers, indicating that teachers appeared to regard parents as being of inferior status, and not worth including as equal in their children's education: "They spoke of persistent unequal practices and attitudes. This sentiment was the general consensus: 'It makes us feel inferior when schools talk down to us,

...working class parents, rather than choosing to be uninvolved, may be reluctant to visit the school because they do not feel confident in dealing with teachers (Mulkerrins, 2007)

because we feel they still believe they are superior to us'" (p. 139). One working-class parent interviewed by Mulkerrins (2007) said, "I get scared still; I get sick when I know principals or teachers are talking down at me, dismissing me" (p. 138). Parental school memories may also vary based on the parent's social class (Räty, 2010), and such memories can be influential on how both parents and children experience education. According to Gorman (1998), middle class parents tend to recall their own school days in positive terms, whereas working-class parents have more diverse experiences.

Reay (1998) presents a picture of parent-teacher relationships that for working-class parents are characterised by separateness but for middle-class parents are characterised by interconnectedness, a dynamic which shapes the attitudes and behaviour of both groups. Middle-class parents face fewer obstacles to becoming involved in their child's education – "they have the resources and power to enable them to continue to seek advantages for their own children" (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011, p. 42). Hegarty (1993) maintains that unless there is a deliberate, sustained effort to bridge the two worlds (or in Bronfenbrenner's terms to create 'linkages' in the 'meso-system'), the likelihood is that the child's education will suffer. As Reay (2005) puts it, "Where children's class and cultural background bears little resemblance to that of their teachers, connections between home and school may be minimal and tenuous" (p. 26).

Expectations by teachers may also impact on their interactions with parents (Dockett et al., 2012), and there is extensive evidence of negative teacher stereotyping of working class parents (Robinson and Harris, 2014). On the other hand, there can be differences

in teachers' attitudes both within schools and between schools, emphasising diversity within this group also. It should also be noted that "most teachers are genuine in their desire to actually find solutions and engage meaningfully with parents, [often with] little or no training" in how to do so (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011, p. 46), and O'Toole (2016) found very positive relationships between teachers and working class parents. She maintained that such positive relationships were based on proactive relationship-building by schools, drawing on both informal, warm personal relationships, and formal structures such as parents' classes to build capacity.

This emphasises the importance of avoiding a limited, uni-cultural approach to the promotion of parental involvement, since traditional models of involvement based on middle-class values and structures could inadvertently maintain the current inequalities in the educational system, as well as the gap between rhetoric and reality (Reay, 1998; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Such approaches can also lead to the development of deficit-based perceptions of certain groups of parents, because when a parent is unaware of the significance of certain institutional practices, they may appear to be less interested and become more distanced from the school (INTO, 2009). On the other hand, approaches that consider structural barriers in schools and in education systems can move towards empowerment of parents from many different backgrounds (Kim and Bryan, 2017). It should be noted that, in general, working class parents of course care just as much as middle class parents about their child's education (Epstein, 2001), and so in spite of the potential difficulties for parents of lower SES in contributing to their children's education, it is important not to allow negative expectations to become self-fulfilling prophecies. As Hartas (2008) points out, "Parents, regardless of their

## Successful schools consciously work to build positive relationships with working class parents, and carefully dismantle barriers based on traditional power structures

socio-economic status and professional networks can influence their children's academic attainment and social and emotional adjustment" (p. 139).

One of the most influential factors in successful approaches to engaging with working class parents is teacher proactivity (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). This has been shown to be more influential on parents' involvement decisions than socio-economic class (Dauber and Epstein, 1993), illustrating the power of 'process' over 'person' and 'context' factors. Successful strategies acknowledge that the capacity of working class parents to be proactive in becoming involved in their children's education may be limited by intimidation, and so the responsibility for proactivity rests with the school (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). Successful schools consciously work to build positive relationships with working class parents, and carefully dismantle barriers based on traditional power structures, not just by building capacity through approaches like parents' classes, but also by recognising the talents and strengths that parents do have, and ensuring that contact is made for positive reasons rather than just negative interactions to address children's behaviour (O'Toole, 2016).

### **Socio-Economic Considerations at Exo- and Macro-level.**

One of the most important distinctions in the primary and secondary school context in Ireland is designation

as 'educationally disadvantaged' under the 'DEIS' (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme. Introduced in 2006/2007, the DEIS scheme provides for a standardised system for identifying and regularly reviewing levels of disadvantage, as well as an integrated approach to service provision, incorporating schemes such as Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL), School Completion Programme (SCP), Support Teacher Project, Giving Children an Even Break, Breaking the Cycle, Disadvantaged Area Scheme and Literacy and Numeracy Schemes. In addition to these targeted supports, DEIS schools benefit from reduced class sizes, with a maximum of twenty pupils in all junior classes (junior infants through second class), twenty-four in all senior classes (third class through sixth class), and eighteen in all secondary level classes (Weir and Denner, 2013). With regards to home-school relationships, one implication of DEIS funding for schools that has significant impact on parental involvement is the appointment of a Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator.

### **Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL)**

The HSCL scheme was established in 1990 (DES, [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)), and according to Mulkerrins (2007), it is based on a Freirian approach to education and community development, emphasising genuine trust in people's creative power and supporting transformation through real dialogue and self-discovery. The central aim of HSCL is to "ensure that good communication and positive relations are fostered and developed between parents, teachers in the primary and post-primary schools and the community support services, with an emphasis on children at risk of educational failure" (INTO, 2009, p. 12). The HSCL scheme also aims to raise awareness in parents of their own capacities to support their children's education (DES,

[www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)), and to ensure that parents have a genuine voice in the exercise of power in the school, thus moving away from the preservation of the status quo, towards a more transformative experience for children and parents in working class communities (Mulkerrins, 2007).

The work of HSCL is widely perceived as admirable and effective (INTO, 2009). Mulkerrins (2007) has identified a rhetoric-reality gap in some cases, however. She cites Freire (1970, p. 43) in maintaining that "transformation is only relevant if it is carried out with the people, not for them". She notes that there is no evidence of consultation between DES and marginalised parents or community groups in the process of setting up HSCL, or even in some of the subsequent evaluations of the scheme (e.g. Archer and Shortt, 2003):

The non-inclusion of representatives from working-class communities in any aspect of the design, organisation, planning, management or development of the HSCL scheme since its inception suggests that only inherent middle-class values may filter through in practice on the ground (Mulkerrins, 2007, p. 134).

This is illustrated by the fact that the majority of parents interviewed by Mulkerrins (2007) had not experienced involvement in any policy-level discussions or decision-making; when asked about policy one parent responded "Was that about keeping the rooms tidy?" (p. 138), implying a role for parents in service to the school, as opposed to true partnership with them. This echoes Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) cautions around

transformation is only  
relevant if it is carried out  
with the people, not for them



...increased respect and recognition for individual children's learning needs, leading to a happier school life for both parents and children and enhancement of parents' confidence and self-esteem through dispelling fears around schooling

the inappropriate use of the term 'partnership', and Bourdieu's (1997) concepts of how the cultural capital of working class parents may be devalued by middle class schools.

Nevertheless, while true transformation may be a slow process, there is evidence that many parents value the input of HSCL (O'Toole, 2016). Parents responding to Mulkerrins (2007) and O'Toole, (2016) indicated that the HSCL Coordinator bridged the divide between parents and teachers, leading to a more equitable balance of power and impacting on perceptions of schools as more open and welcoming places. Parents in both studies also noted increased respect and recognition for individual children's learning needs, leading to a happier school life for both parents and children and enhancement of parents' confidence and self-esteem through dispelling fears around schooling. Also noted were reduced feelings of intimidation on behalf of parents when dealing with schools and a sense of community developed through the work of HSCL programmes (Mulkerrins, 2007; O'Toole, 2016). It would seem that parents value HSCL at times of transition particularly, allaying fears and gaining a sense of being listened to (O'Brien, 2004; DES, 2007).

## **ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE, AND ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY**

Parents and children can sometimes experience a 'clash of cultures' in engaging with school systems (O'Toole, 2016), and this can impact on the level and quality of their engagement with children's education (Daniel, 2015; Johnson et al., 2016). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) outline examples of research illuminating the issue of culture with reference to parental involvement: Koki and Lee (1998) found that it was impossible to fully understand the relationships between parents in New Zealand who have come from the Pacific Islands and their children's schools without thorough consideration of a tradition which emphasises lineage and culture as family domains, and education as the domain of schools. Young (1998) reported similar findings among Mexican-American parents, with cultural roles, expectations and values playing a pivotal role in how trust is perceived and developed. Equally, Tobin, Arzubaga and Adair (2013) showed how parents of immigrants tended to have quite different expectations of pre-school than their children's pre-school teachers in the US context, and indicated that policy-makers and educators are still very much struggling with how best to serve a diverse population of children and parents.

The perspective of non-Irish parents is largely absent from the literature on parental involvement in this country, albeit with some exceptions (O'Toole, 2016; O'Toole, 2017; Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity and Byrne, 2009). Some Irish work on linguistic and cultural considerations in education generally (Eriksson, 2013; Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009) and the international work of Cummins (2000; 2001; 2005; Cummins et al., 2005; Ntelioglou, Fannin, Montanera and Cummins, 2014) has

identified some potential challenges. In particular, it can be difficult for parents to maintain their own sense of linguistic and cultural identity, while at the same time supporting their children to make a life for themselves and succeed at school in Ireland (Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009; O'Toole, 2016). Edwards (2009) maintains that language and identity are inseparable, and Llamas and Watt (2010) agree:

The connection between language and identity is a fundamental element of our experience of being human. Language not only reflects who we are but in some sense it is who we are, and its use defines us directly and indirectly (p. 1).

This begs the question, what are the implications when a child starts in a school where the language of instruction is not the same as that spoken at home? Kraftsoff and Quinn (2009) note that on starting school, children of minority groups often acculturate to the dominant culture at a faster rate than their parents, and Machowska-Kosciak (2013) indicates that they can initially reject the home language and culture in favour of the dominant language and culture. This can be very emotional and even distressing for parents, given the importance placed by many parents on their children speaking their language with regards to cultural identity (Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009; O'Toole, 2016). According to Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000) approaches to parental involvement that work, actively engage with the cultural and linguistic goals of parents because they are central to the identities of children, families and communities, and loss of first language can lead to loss of self-worth, breakdown of family relationships and inability to socialise into the family's culture.

There is some evidence however, that schools often fail to do this (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) and it is little wonder, therefore that research indicates that minorities tend to be less involved in their children's education (Harris and Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Harris, 2014), perhaps due to less access to the necessary resources as well as cultural and linguistic differences with the school (Brooker, 2008). As Hornby and Lafaele (2011) point out:

Failure to understand the impact of ethnicity on [parental involvement] and to incorporate programmes that are genuinely inclusive of other cultures is probably another reason why the practice of involving parents in schools is typically less effective than it should be (p. 42).

Parents' lack of confidence in supporting their children's education can certainly be heightened if the language of instruction is not their first language, limiting communication between parents and teachers (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Johnson et al., 2016). In the Irish context, the majority of principals in Smyth et al.'s (2009) work reported language-based challenges among 'nearly all' or 'more than half' of the parents of immigrant students. This was identified as a significant barrier to communication between parents and schools, as well as a factor that prevented parents from actively seeking contact. Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) indicated similar difficulties for Irish parents whose children attended

Parents in that research reported a sense of intimidation and low self-efficacy beliefs with regards to their ability to support their children's education through Irish

Irish-medium immersion schools if they had limited proficiency in the Irish language themselves. Parents in that research reported a sense of intimidation and low self-efficacy beliefs with regards to their ability to support their children's education through Irish, and one other interesting point related to the increasing number of non-Irish parents choosing Irish-medium immersion education for their children. More positive results were reported by O'Toole (2016), who described vibrant, linguistically and culturally diverse communities, and schools who make every effort to embrace this. The reasons for the positive engagement of parents from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds reported by O'Toole's Irish research were strong awareness in schools of potential issues of linguistic and cultural capital and proactive relationship building in order to mitigate them. The importance of such approaches is confirmed in international research by Johnson et al. (2016). However, since the majority of teachers in many jurisdictions come from the dominant culture and class, they may need support to learn how to connect with families from diverse backgrounds, and so teacher education and continuing professional development may have a significant role to play (Bell, Granty, Yoo, Jimenez and Frye, 2017).

### **Linguistic and Cultural Capital**

Migrant families may be at a significant disadvantage when it comes to involvement in their children's education because even where they occupy the middle classes, with all the cultural, social and economic capital that entails, they may experience language barriers, and may not have first-hand knowledge of educational systems to support choice and proactivity with regards to involvement in their children's education (Antony-Newman, 2018; O'Toole, 2017). Parents from some

minority ethnic groups interviewed by Katz et al. (2001) indicated that they could not give their children essential parental support in relation to education because they did not understand the educational system. This was noted in the Irish context by O'Toole (2016).

Cultural capital related to religion may also have significant impact on access to education in Ireland as well as on systemic structures that may feed into segregation and even racism (Kitching, 2010). The extent to which Catholicism dominates patronage of Irish schools (Donnelly, 2011; Kitching, 2010; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006) has meant that in areas where school places are limited, arguments are increasingly made that Catholic parents should have 'first claim' on local Catholic schools, leading to the emergence of 'spill-over' primary schools where all students are of (Black) African origin (Kitching, 2010). Kitching (2010) refers to this phenomenon as the re-racialisation of cultural Catholicism through the politics of school access. Thus, a child's language, culture and religion may impact on what school they go to, how they experience education and how well they adjust, in processes relevant to bioecological perspectives regarding diversity, context, socio-historical influences and the importance of understanding these issues in developing policy. This is particularly relevant to considerations of 'time', in that enrolment policies in Ireland are under significant review at present, in large measure to address these concerns about diversity, access and equality.

### **Contextual Supports**

There are some positive indications in Irish research that schools, and in particular home-school-community-liaison coordinators, do in fact proactively focus on immigrant families to promote relationships between

## ...the need to draw on children's home culture and language as both a learning resource and an important repository for children's pre-existing knowledge

home and school for this cohort (Smyth et al., 2009). Many schools hold events like Intercultural Days, and schools often develop educational classes for parents to encourage their involvement. English-language classes may be particularly useful in attracting parents to become involved with Irish schools, an important contextual factor supporting the development of good relationships (O'Toole, 2016; 2017; Smyth et al., 2009).

However, some authors argue there is little evidence internationally of more than lip service to the ideals of 'partnership' with parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and support structures are sometimes based on 'socialisation' (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). This means that schools attempt to shape parental attitudes and practices so that they facilitate schooling and meet the needs of the school or of the broader society (Adelman, 1992), rather than attempting to shape schooling to ensure the creation of a learning environment where everyone 'fits in'. This is central to the work of socio-linguists such as Cummins (2000; 2001; 2005; Cummins et al., 2005; Ntelioglou, Fannin and Cummins, 2014) who emphasise the need to draw on children's home culture and language as both a learning resource and an important repository for children's pre-existing knowledge. Approaches such as Intercultural Days are sometimes seen as tokenism and a sort of 'tourist' interculturalism (Murray and O'Doherty, 2001). Equally, Eriksson (2013) found that children often do not want attention drawn to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as it increases their sense of difference and 'otherness'.

Regarding supports for home-school communication, approaches such as language classes for parents may take a somewhat deficit approach, with parents seen as not having the skills to participate in their children's education, as opposed to drawing on the skills they do have (Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013). On the other hand, parents responding to O'Toole's (2016) research in Ireland indicated that they highly valued the English and Irish language classes offered by schools. The literature recommends that initiatives such as asking parents to speak the language of the dominant culture in the home should be treated with caution, since maintenance of the primary language in their children may be essential to cultural identity and ethnic pride (Edwards, 2009; Kraftsoff and Quinn, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000), and the potential for language loss is great when the parent chooses to, or is required to, predominantly speak the dominant language (Burck, 2005).

On the other hand, Smyth et al. (2009) point out that linguistic diversity is improving in publications explaining educational practices to parents in Ireland and many of the NCCA resources for parents identified on page 65 are available in seven different languages. NCCA also offer tip sheets on supporting children to become bilingual. O'Toole (2016) reported creative approaches to overcoming linguistic barriers, such as employment of translators, and accessing linguistic support from within families and communities. Gu (2017) notes the need to make school websites more accessible for immigrant families. Thus, as outlined by Erdreich and Golden (2017), it may be that processes around parental involvement entail more than just the fit or lack of fit between the cultural capital imported from home into school. Rather, the cultural shaping of parental involvement can take place within and through supportive encounters between school and family.

where a parent's gender is different to that of the majority of teachers and other school staff, as is commonly the case for fathers, difficulties may arise, and fathers may feel excluded

### **PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AS A GENDERED CONCEPT**

Parental involvement, engagement and partnership in education are not gender-neutral concepts (Vincent and Martin, 2005). Research has strongly identified a difference in parental involvement in children's education on the basis of gender; fathers tend to be less involved than mothers (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Hart, 2011; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Metso, 2004; Vincent and Martin, 2005). Cullen et al. (2011) describe the weight of research evidence that stresses the important role that fathers have to play in their children's educational development, but note that there is a distinct absence of men involved in children's learning. As such, a bioecological approach to identifying ways of empowering parents to support their children's education needs to consider the issue of gender, and in particular, the involvement of fathers in their children's education.

There is evidence that this issue is not considered by professionals in educational settings – Hart's (2011) review of fathers' involvement in assessment of special educational needs found that even though it was rare for Educational Psychologists to consult fathers, their reports tended to refer to the views of 'parents'. As Hart remarks, "it appears that when it comes to involving parents or eliciting their views, mothers are considered synonymous with parents" (p. 163). This is a good example of unstated values impacting on policy and practice. According to Hart (2011), much of the existing research on gender differences in parents' involvement

in education has been from a feminist perspective, viewing increased involvement of mothers as evidence of women suffering an injustice, as opposed to recognising the disempowerment of men as fathers through their exclusion from educational processes. Hart maintains that while lingering structural and societal inequalities do contribute to the perception that women are more available for contributing to their child's education, we must also acknowledge the concern that fathers may not be in a position to exercise their rights and responsibilities as they may wish. As such, it is important to go beyond a surface level of analysis in determining why fathers may not be involved.

One possible barrier to paternal involvement in education could be the primarily female nature of many educational settings. Hart (2011) maintains that where a parent's gender is different to that of the majority of teachers and other school staff, as is commonly the case for fathers, difficulties may arise, and fathers may feel excluded. This could certainly be the case in Ireland, where the feminisation of education in the pre-school (Doherty and Walshe, 2011) and primary school (McDonagh and O'Toole, 2011) sectors in particular is extensive (O'Toole, 2016).

Employment patterns may also provide a potential barrier to fathers' involvement in their children's education (Kahn, 2006). Goldman's (2005) review noted that the circumstances under which fathers were least likely to be involved in their children's education were when fathers were manual workers or worked in the evenings. The timing of meetings in schools often makes it more difficult for fathers to attend and be involved (Hart, 2011). In spite of extensive changes to societal structures in recent decades, there is a continuing likelihood of fathers being the primary 'bread-winner'; while couples

today are far less likely to rely solely on the male as the source of earned income, in many dual-earner couples, the female still assumes a secondary financial role, reflected in the relatively high incidence of part-time work among married women. This certainly appears to be the case in Ireland: according to the most recent figures available from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) on the issue, in 2011 married men worked longer hours in paid employment than married women, with 44.5% of married men working for 40 or more hours per week compared with 14.7% of married women. In contrast, 25.1% of married women worked for 20-29 hours per week compared with just 5.5% of married men. This may mean that mothers have more informal contact with schools “at the school gate” (Hart, 2011), and as such become the point of contact for schools and the conduit for information on children’s schooling. This is particularly an issue for fathers who live apart from their children (Hart, 2011; Kahn, 2006).

Such practices sometimes mean that fathers feel excluded, or feel they have little to offer (Hart, 2011). Schools sometimes develop assumptions indicating that paternal involvement is not expected and in such cases tacit assumptions can be embedded in the practices of schools (Hart, 2011). If fathers receive communication from schools, if meetings are arranged at convenient times, and if implicit messages about the importance of a father’s input are transmitted, it is more likely that fathers will play an active role in their child’s education (Hart, 2011). Hart (2011) also found that the fathers who are more likely to be involved in their children’s education are those who feel that there will be a benefit, those who feel that paternal involvement accords with their normative beliefs (i.e. that involvement in education is something that fathers do) and those who feel able to

Fathers need to feel that  
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Hart (2011)

contribute in a meaningful way. Fathers need to feel that there is a point to their involvement and that it will be of benefit (Hart, 2011). Goldman (2005) found that fathers within a two-parent family were more likely to be involved when mothers were too, but single-parent fathers tended to be more involved in schools than resident fathers in two-parent families. Cullen et al. (2011) found that fathers were more likely to be involved in their children’s education when partnership with them was strategically planned, when fathers were consulted about what sort of support and activities they needed, and when the way in which they were approached was conscious and respectful of different masculinities and ways of being a father. This is particularly important when one considers intercultural differences in perceptions and norms around the role of father (Seward and Stanley-Stevens, 2014), again emphasising issues of diversity and the impact of relationships and contexts on personal choices.

Cullen et al. (2011) maintain that fatherhood roles are in transition, and that attitudes among some working fathers are ahead of the reality of their work and care arrangements, reflecting the bioecological idea that individual behaviour must be understood in its socio-historical context. Hart (2011) reported similar findings, indicating that a number of fathers experience a state of internal conflict, wanting to occupy an active, involved role in their children’s



education, but adhering more closely to more traditional gender roles due to the reality of their life circumstances. An examination of the involvement of fathers in their children's education is particularly important in the light of the dissonance between research on the benefits of positive father involvement with their children's learning and education, the policy imperatives of many governments internationally, and practitioner guidance to engage fathers, on the one hand, and the experience of father engagement on the other (Cullen et al., 2011). Hart (2011) recommends ensuring accurate records are kept of all persons with parental responsibility for a child, ensuring that non-resident parents are treated equally, that information is shared with them and they are invited to participate in the same way as resident parents, giving parents greater control over when and where meetings are held, being aware that fathers may prefer informal, non school-based settings, and having a minimum expectation that staff will talk to both parents, unless there is a good reason why this cannot happen.


## **FAMILY STRUCTURE**

Another key issue of diversity for consideration within a bioecological framework on parental involvement is family structure. The concept of 'family' is open to a diversity of interpretations, and different parenting arrangements bring different challenges and benefits for the social and emotional development of children that may impact on children's experiences of education. Cullen et al. (2011) point out that rapidly changing family structures have led to substantial changes in the role of fathers and mothers, with uncertain implications for children. When parents re-marry or find new partners, there can be the potential for what is known as 'boundary ambiguity' – "the uncertainty in step-families of who is in or out of the family and who is performing or responsible

For example, does a mother's new partner have the right to insist that the child does her homework? What involvement does a child's father have in education if he is no longer resident with the child?

for certain tasks in the family system" (Santrock, 2008, p. 312). For example, does a mother's new partner have the right to insist that the child does her homework? What involvement does a child's father have in education if he is no longer resident with the child?

As such, any approach to supporting parental involvement in education must be sensitive to the needs of different types of families and different family contexts. As one teacher who responded to the INTO's research on transitions (2009) stated, "It is very easy to have this notion of a family in your head, but what is the family now?" (p. 32). Cullen et al. (2011) describe the increasing prominence of the agenda around divorced, separated and unmarried fathers' rights and responsibilities, but also the growing pressure from grandparents and step-parents for extended rights of contact after parental separation (Wasoff, 2009). The rights of same-sex couples are increasingly gaining recognition in Ireland with the passing of the Civil Partnership Act in 2010 followed by the overwhelming 'yes' vote in support of equality of marriage rights for same-sex couples in 2015. This can be located within the context of legal recognition for same-sex partnerships in many Western countries and the granting of parenting rights, such as second parent adoption in same-sex couples, as well as greater



recourse to surrogate parenthood (Millbank, 2008). This is particularly important to remember in the context of parental involvement in education, since as Reay (1998) points out, those parents who tend to be involved in their children's education and are often unfairly defined by teachers as "the good parents" are typically white, middle-class, married and heterosexual:

In this context of changing and more complex family structures, initiatives designed to increase parental involvement with children's education are potentially sensitive because they must engage with the lived experience of individual family lives, however these are constituted (Cullen et al. 2011, p. 488).

Schools that are successful in supporting parental involvement, engagement and partnership are those who sensitively approach invitations, and allow for multiple definitions of 'family' within their policies and practice (O'Toole, 2016).



# Summary & Conclusions

Analysis within a bioecological framework leads to a conception of parental empowerment as opposed to mere involvement (O'Toole, 2016). As Bastiani (1993) points out, providing for genuine home-school partnership, will not quietly evolve into solutions in its own good time, and individual children, parents, teachers and schools need support, imagination and commitment from researchers and policy-makers. The current literature review seeks to identify important factors related to development of meaningful involvement of parents in their children's education so

that the very different contributions and capacities of individual homes and schools can work together in the interests of all children. This is achieved using the lens of a bioecological framework, to identify important factors under the banners of 'process', 'person', 'context' and 'time', while acknowledging the complex and mutually influencing nature of all four. This section synthesises and evaluates the findings on parental involvement and engagement that have been developed through application of the bioecological PPCT lens, and explicitly identifies their relevance to the research questions.

## **1. What are the features of good parent-school partnerships during the primary school years and focusing, in particular, on supporting all children's learning?**


### **What types of parental engagement make a difference to children's educational outcomes during their primary school years?**

The literature on parental involvement, engagement and partnership has not, to date, reached consensus on the types of parental engagement that make a difference to children's educational outcomes during their primary school years. Confusion still exists regarding relevant terminology and what it means. Debates centre around 'involvement' which tends to refer simply to activity with relevance to education, 'engagement' which relates to a more agentic conception of listening to parents and engaging with them on their terms and not just on school terms, and 'partnership' involving parents contributing to and being supported in turn by schools in a way that is respectful to the needs of both and which allows parents to have input into the most fundamental

questions of school ethos and culture. None of these terms are uncontested. Equally, the role of 'school parent' has not yet been clearly defined in the literature, and often a distinction is made between home-based and school-based involvement with extensive evidence supporting the value of both.

### **How do parents actively contribute to good parent-school partnerships?**

There has been a shift in recent literature towards further exploration of home-based involvement and exploration of features of positive 'home learning environments'. Often this has little to do with what happens in school, and the home learning environments that have been shown to be most successful in increasing children's achievement are those that contain lots of books, and access to literacy through opportunities like membership of public libraries, where there is access to some technologies (computers, internet) and access to others is limited (television, smart phones), where there are clear rules and expectations for children's



behaviour, and where relationships are warm and supportive. Positive attitudes to education and transmission of high expectations to children may be among the most important of parents' roles when it comes to supporting their children's achievement. A 'stage setting' approach has been shown to be effective in terms of parental involvement, whereby parents provide children with enriching experiences and positive perceptions of education, and this may be more important than direct involvement with schools through formal measures like committee membership.

However, concepts of 'good' home learning environments are culturally loaded so care must be taken to avoid deficit models regarding particular groups of parents, or 'colonisation of the home' for busy families. Parental beliefs and attitudes are often shaped by their own experiences with education, and where these experiences have been positive, schools can leverage that predisposition towards engagement. Where these experiences have been negative, schools need to be proactive in showing parents that their children's educational experiences are more positive than theirs were, and in finding ways to draw parents into the life of the school that do not involve negative interactions based on disciplinary issues.


### **How do schools actively contribute to these good parent-school partnerships?**

The PPCT structure provides a good outline of how schools can actively contribute to parent-school partnerships. The most important aspect may be 'process' or relationships. Parents' proactivity may be limited by feelings of intimidation and fear, sometimes related to factors like differences in social, cultural and linguistic capital between home and school. This means that schools must be proactive in issuing invitations and identifying systems and supports for parents to become engaged in the life of schools. Schools must also actively work to acknowledge and address power imbalances and emphasise to parents that schools

are 'their place' too. The crucial nature of relationships is the common finding across a range of disparate research, and relationship-building must be a core feature of any approach to creating good home-school partnerships. There may be a role for Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development in supporting teachers to learn how to do this.

The development of responsive, open and varied systems of communication between home and school provide one important element of a proactive approach to relationship building. If communication systems are to be effective they should be both informal, based on warm, inclusive personal relationships, and formal based on systems like home-work journals, technology-based communication systems (e.g. emails, 'e-portal' systems like 'edmodo' or 'class dojo' accessed by both parents and teachers, text messaging systems, etc), information evenings, parents' handbooks and opportunities to make appointments to meet when a discussion requires greater focus than can be given in passing at drop-off or collection time. School websites can also be used for communication with parents, and they should move beyond the social aspects of education to include pedagogical aspects also.

The development of positive relationships between home and school can also be dependent on 'person' factors such as the responsiveness of individual teachers, and parental beliefs and attitudes. Approaches to encouraging positive home-school partnership that work, proactively target parents' confidence, self-efficacy beliefs and understanding that their input matters and can be effective. They also allow for individual family needs and pressures, such as those experienced by single parent families or parents who work long hours, and try to find ways to facilitate communication that still allow for busy family lives.



School contexts also have an important role to play in promoting partnership. Formal programmes to support parental involvement can be effective; those that work are well-organised and goal-linked, and focus on actively increasing the involvement of more and different parents. They may wish to consider school structure and environment, including access to the school building at drop-off and collection time, and access to a parents' room that provides both a practical solution to the need for a private space for parents and teachers to meet but also gives a powerful message regarding the welcome for parents within the walls of the school. The role of school leadership is also highlighted as a significant contextual support for positive home-school partnerships, and the literature indicates that approaches to parental involvement, engagement and partnership are more likely to be successful when principals display a 'side by side' rather than a 'top down' approach to management of school relationships, and when they actively and explicitly prioritise relationships between home and school.

**What strategies are particularly effective in enhancing partnerships between parents and schools and, in particular, what strategies work best where extra support may be needed, for example, for children with special educational needs, children from disadvantaged communities, children with English as an additional language, children from ethnic minorities?**


While the literature does identify significant barriers to home-school partnership when there are additional needs involved based on SEN, poverty or differences in linguistic and cultural background, more recent literature is optimistic with regards to the ability of schools to overcome these barriers so long as they are conscious of the issues and develop explicit, proactive strategies for equitable engagement. Again, supporting a bioecological conception of parental involvement, the crucial factor in successful strategies appears to be warm, supportive, inclusive and

respectful personal relationships. It is important to develop a 'universal design' approach to strategies for encouraging parental involvement, engagement and partnership that is cognisant and respectful of diversity and difference.

Regarding children with special educational needs, parental involvement in Ireland is facilitated by legislation which requires all parents of children with SEN to have the opportunity to become involved in the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for their child. While disagreements between home and school can emerge around children's needs, the schools that are successful in involving the parents of children with SEN emphasise open and transparent communication about topics beyond simply behavioural or other difficulties, timely applications for supports such as Special Needs Assistants and Assistive Technology and building personal relationships of trust.

Regarding parents from disadvantaged communities, the approaches to parental involvement that work recognise that some such parents may have had negative experiences of education themselves, or may have low self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to support their children's learning. Successful schools work proactively to build positive relationships with parents, and carefully dismantle barriers based on traditional power structures, not just by building capacity through approaches like parents' classes, but also by recognising the talents and strengths that parents do have, and ensuring that contact is made for positive reasons rather than just negative interactions to address children's behaviour. Resources available to schools through the DEIS scheme are very useful in supporting positive partnerships with parents, and the role of the Home-School-Community-Liaison Coordinator is particularly valued. It should be noted however that these supports are only available in designated DEIS schools, which of course do not reach all children from disadvantaged families.





Regarding children with English as an additional language and children from ethnic minorities, rather than attempting to integrate families into the dominant culture, schools must actively engage with the cultural and linguistic goals of parents because they are central to the identities of children, families and communities. While schools may be tempted to recruit parents as supports for their children's English language learning, approaches such as asking parents to speak English in the home should be avoided due to the risk of language loss and the importance of language for family and cultural identity. Approaches such as 'intercultural days' and English language classes can be useful in drawing parents into the life of the school, so long as they are treated sensitively and both 'tokenism' and deficit perspectives are avoided. Access to translated materials, such as those provided by the NCCA, is important, as are creative approaches like accessing linguistic supports from within families and communities.

Other considerations with regards to diversity in parental involvement are gender – there is extensive evidence that mothers still tend to be more involved than fathers – and family structure – the idea of

'family' is open to a variety of interpretations. Again, proactivity and relationship-building are the hallmark of successful approaches by schools to involve different genders and family types. If fathers as well as mothers receive communication from schools, if meetings are arranged at convenient times, and if implicit messages about the importance of a fathers' and mothers' input are transmitted, it is more likely that parents from a variety of family structures will play an active role in their child's education. It is also important to recognise that while ongoing work practices mean that fathers may be less involved in school-based parental involvement, they may contribute equally to the 'stage setting' that takes place in home-based involvement.

Since the majority of the teaching profession are drawn from the dominant cultural, linguistic and social classes, and the majority are also female, there is a requirement for Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development to offer opportunities to deconstruct these issues with reference to parental involvement, and to furnish teachers with strategies for relationship-building with a diversity of parents.



## 2. What role does homework play, if any, in helping parents to engage with their children's learning during the primary school years?

The literature on homework is characterised by a lack of consensus. Both positive and negative effects of homework are noted, including disagreement on its impact on achievement and its implications for family life. In fact, it is possible to find literature to champion almost any opinion on homework. Where homework is found to be an effective support for learning, there seems to be a 'grade level' effect, whereby effectiveness is more pronounced in older children. Significant gaps have been identified in the literature with regard to the efficacy of homework in Irish primary schools specifically, and this may be an important focus for Part 2 of the current research.

Regarding parents' involvement with homework, again there are mixed findings, and this could be linked to a lack of definition in some studies on what is meant by 'homework help'. The most effective approaches from parents regarding children's achievement appear to be those that promote autonomy of learning. Direct help with homework may be a hindrance to academic development and achievement. Documented benefits of parental involvement in homework include improved homework completion and performance, enhanced enjoyment of homework and positive attitudes towards it, improved communication between parent and child and parent and teacher, opportunities to express high expectations and build academic self-efficacy and

improved behaviour and self-regulation. Documented challenges associated with parental involvement in homework include interference with learning and confusing instructional techniques, emotional costs and tension including fatigue, frustration and conflict between parent and child, increased pressure on children, and increased differentials between the highest and lowest achievers. Some of these findings seem, at least on the surface, to be in direct contradiction to each other (e.g. increased enjoyment but also increased frustration and conflict), so it is difficult to draw solid conclusions and recommendations from the currently available literature regarding parental roles in homework.

In as much as any conclusions can be drawn from the literature on homework, it seems that for it to be useful it must be clear with regard to content and purpose, and be appropriate for the stage of learning a child is at, as well as being aligned with the child's interests. In setting homework it is recommended that teachers consider giving individualised, project-based homework tasks whereby children can draw on their own talents and interests. It is also recommended that teachers explicitly engage in discussions with parents about how they can best support their child's learning through homework. Gaps in the literature include a dearth of studies on homework in primary schools, particularly in the Irish context and a lack of information on the benefits of homework in relation to young children in primary school, especially those in the early years of primary school.

### 3. What are the key implications for:

#### **Curriculum development?**

The available information on parental involvement in curriculum development nationally and internationally is somewhat limited, but what literature does exist indicates that parents tend to feel under-informed with regards to content and systems of curriculum. Opportunities to engage with parents with regards to curriculum development are available at national level, through the NCCA's partnership model of curriculum development, and at local level through involvement of parents with various aspects of both Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum. Access to information related to curriculum that is parent-focused, easily accessible and available in a variety of formats and languages is important in order to enable parental engagement with the curriculum. Extensive resources of this type are available through the NCCA and NPC. It may be possible to increase direct parental involvement in curriculum development by drawing on successful approaches used in other jurisdictions. Equally, schools may wish, at local level, to focus on finding ways to draw parents and families into the translation of curricula and curriculum frameworks into pedagogical practice.

#### **For those working with parents in support roles?**

At micro-level, the strongest implication emerging from the literature on parental involvement, engagement

and partnership is that those working in support roles with parents ought to focus proactively on relationship-building. Contextual supports and systems are also important, but they draw their efficacy largely from the impact they have on human relationships between the people involved, parents, teachers and children. Equally important is awareness of potential barriers related to individual child, parent, family and community factors, and that seeming disengagement may in fact be related to intimidation. The most successful supports for parental involvement are provided by support workers who acknowledge, and actively work to dismantle, these barriers.

At exo- and macro-level, the development of policies and legislation supporting parental involvement are also important, but even more so is the development of easily accessible resources to support parental understanding of their role in their children's education, such as the supports provided by the NCCA and NPC. It is also important that individuals and services who seek to support parents and families, and who aim to promote parental involvement, engagement and partnership should work in tandem rather than in isolation. Funders should ensure that partnership between relevant agencies is promoted, rather than having undue competition for limited resources. An example of such partnership is the current endeavour between the NCCA and NPC.



# Final Summary

The aim of this literature review was to provide direction for the NCCA and NPC on how parents and schools can work in partnership to support children's learning and development across the curriculum during the primary school years. This review showed that building and developing good parent-school partnerships is not straightforward, and the strategies that work in different jurisdictions including Ireland, involve proactive approaches to overcoming barriers to good relationships. This part of the research showed that:

- A.** There is extensive evidence that parental involvement and engagement with children's learning linked to partnerships between the home and school, has immediate and long-term effects, regarding children's behaviour, social and emotional development, academic achievement and enjoyment of school. However, the types of parental involvement that are most effective are not yet clear.
- B.** The most effective examples of how parents are encouraged and supported by schools to become involved and engaged in their children's learning during their primary school years focus on proactive relationship building with parents and families, and children's relationships (both with adults and with other children) are also prioritised. Approaches to supporting parental involvement at micro-, meso-,

exo- and macro-levels must also take account of diversity in terms of language, culture, religion, socio-economics, disability, gender and family structure. Unicultural approaches may exacerbate pre-existing inequalities. This literature shows that schools would benefit from formation of stronger 'linkages' both with educational settings at alternative levels (pre-school to primary school and primary to secondary school), particularly regarding curriculum, as well as with services in their communities that could support their engagement with parents and families. Thus, measures of 'quality' at micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels should focus on 'process' rather than 'context', foregrounding relationships and positive interactions with families. While contextual supports such as parents' rooms, parents' councils and communication systems are of course important, the structures that 'work' may actually be reliant on the interpersonal relationships underlying them rather than the specific structures employed per se.

- C.** The role of learning at home is often based on 'stage setting' involving access to enriching experiences and development of positive attitudes towards and expectations for education. The role of homework is debateable but it may be useful so long as it is relevant to the child, and the format of parents' help with homework promotes rather than limits independent learning.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: The 13 areas included in the ABC programme

Area	Lead Organisation
Ballymun	YoungBallymun
Dublin Northside	Northside Partnership, Preparing for Life
Tallaght West	Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative Ltd. (CDI)
Clondalkin	Clondalkin Behavioural Initiative Ltd. t/a Archways
Louth	Louth Leader Partnership
Finglas	Barnardos Republic of Ireland Ltd.
Grangegorman	Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)
Knocknaheeney	Northside Community Health Initiative (Cork) Ltd. (NICHE)
Dublin Docklands	Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland (NCI)
Bray	Bray Area Partnership (BAP)
Limerick	People Action Against Unemployment Ltd. (PAUL Partnership)
Ballyfermot/Chapelizod	Ballyfermot/Chapelizod Partnership
Midlands	HSE Midlands Area



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