

**HOME-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY-LIAISON  
IN EARLY START SCHOOLS**

**An Early Start Evaluation Report  
to the Department of Education and Science**

**Mary Lewis and Peter Archer**

**December, 2006**

## Introduction

The Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL) scheme is part of a strategy to tackle disadvantage in designated schools in Ireland. It became a mainstream intervention in 1993 and currently operates in 278 primary schools and 189 post-primary schools. Early Start is a preschool programme that was introduced in 1995 to schools in disadvantaged areas. It is available in 40 primary schools, all of which also participate in the HSCL scheme. Differences between the initiatives are therefore reflected in both scope and scale. Early Start is primarily a curricular intervention with a strong emphasis on language development which still maintains pilot status in a small number of primary schools while Home-School-Community-Liaison is a parent involvement intervention that is served by a national network of coordinators in primary and second-level schools. On closer inspection, however, a number of elements that are common to both schemes may be identified. In brief, these elements embrace strategies that may be described as primarily preventive rather than curative, are committed to a high degree of parent involvement, and have, as their overall objective, improved standards of literacy and numeracy among children (for further discussion on key features of national policy on educational disadvantage see Archer & Weir, 2005; Kellaghan, Weir, Ó hÚllacháin & Morgan, 1995 and, for a description of a current attempt to integrate a variety of aspects of the strategy to tackle disadvantage, see Department of Education and Science, 2005).

Both the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme and the Early Start programme have been the subject of separate on-going evaluation for the Department of Education and Science as elements of the Department's overall strategy to deal with educational disadvantage. (For evaluations of HSCL see Archer & Shortt, 2003; Ryan, 1994, 1999; for Early Start evaluations see Educational Research Centre, 1998; Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999; Lewis & Archer, 2002, 2005). While the interface of programmes with other initiatives has not been a major focus of any of the evaluation activity to date, the role of HSCL in Early Start did receive some attention in the first Early Start evaluation report (Educational Research Centre, 1998). It concluded that the role of HSCL coordinators in facilitating parent involvement in Early Start had increased during the life of the first evaluation (1994-1999), though schools varied considerably in the extent of their input. The main work of the coordinators in Early

Start was described as consisting of organising talks and training courses for parents. Take-up by parents was reported to be mixed and to have remained unchanged after a period of two years. Issues identified by coordinators at the time included the need for clarification regarding their role in Early Start, the difficulty of visiting the homes of potential applicants near the boundaries of school-catchment areas, and the need for more information for ‘agencies’ outside the school regarding the objectives of Early Start. A subsequent Early Start evaluation report confirmed the previously reported differences between Early Start schools with regard to HSCL input. On the basis of the observations of school principals and experienced Early Start teachers, it noted that in most schools HSCL coordinators were involved in contacting families to encourage participation in Early Start, but that their role in fostering parent involvement varied from school to school (Lewis & Archer, 2002).

### **The Present Study**

In the current phase of Early Start evaluation, it was decided to look more closely at the interface between HSCL and Early Start, and, initially, at any rate, to base the examination on the reports and experiences of HSCL coordinators involved in Early Start. At the request of the National Coordinator, all coordinators who worked in schools with Early Start centres were invited to attend an in-career development seminar in February 2005.<sup>1</sup> The seminar also provided an opportunity for HSCL coordinators to network with their counterparts in Early Start schools. It was planned to provide coordinators with time to familiarise themselves with Early Start evaluation findings, to recount their own experiences of Early Start, and to share any lessons of good practice regarding aspects of their work (e.g., contact with parents, family learning strategies, children’s attendance, community support) with their colleagues. During the seminar, it was suggested that, as part of Early Start evaluation, a postal questionnaire would be designed for the purpose of obtaining more detailed information from individual coordinators. The questionnaire was subsequently sent to each of the 38 HSCL coordinators attached to Early Start schools, 33 of whom responded before the end of the school year.

---

<sup>1</sup> The National Coordinator of the HSCL scheme was given the additional responsibility of coordinating Early Start in 2002.

In the questionnaire, to obtain information on their role in Early Start, HSCL coordinators were asked about the nature and extent of their involvement in Early Start, their views on the contribution of HSCL to Early Start and of Early Start to HSCL, and their perceptions of the impact of Early Start on the attitudes of parents and teachers. Some additional information was obtained on the integration of Early Start in Early Years provision since this was an issue to which the National Coordinator had been devoting attention. A key objective of the exercise was to tap into the HSCL/Early Start experiences of coordinators with a view to identifying strategies that they considered successful in dealing with issues of enrolment, attendance, and parent involvement in their schools. These and other issues had been explored in the February seminar and were again discussed at a series of meetings convened by the National Coordinator for groups of HSCL coordinators in June when the questionnaires were due to be returned. It was in this context of increased awareness of the strengths of Early Start, its weaknesses, and the challenges facing coordinators as part of the Early Start team, that the information for the present study was obtained.

### **Coordinators' Questionnaire Results**

The results of analysis of data provided in the questionnaires are presented in this report. Findings are presented in five main sections. The first section provides some background information, including data on the types and numbers of schools in which coordinators are employed and characteristics of their Early Start programmes (e.g., number of places, rate of progression to junior infants) in addition to data on the length of time respondents have worked as coordinators and the numbers of Early Start teachers that they have worked with during that time. The second section is a description of the coordinators' role in Early Start. It documents Early Start activities undertaken by coordinators in 2004/05, reports on the proportion of time they devoted to Early Start in that year, and identifies aspects of work they would like to prioritise in future. Perceptions of coordinators of their role in Early Start, and how it compares with other aspects of their work in the school, are described. The views of coordinators on the impact of HSCL on Early Start are presented in the third section of the report which focuses on the key issues of enrolment, attendance, and parent involvement as well as including findings on the attitudes of Early Start parents and

teachers. In describing the impact of Early Start on HSCL in section four, findings are presented relating to coordinators' views of the extent to which Early Start has improved subsequent parent involvement in the school and its effect on other HSCL responsibilities. In section five, the integration of Early Start in Early Years provision is briefly discussed. The extent to which schools have made adaptations to integrate Early Start with infant classes is described and the issue of how coordinators might contribute to that process is raised. A discussion of conclusions completes the report.

## **I Background Information**

The questionnaire data indicate that HSCL coordinators' experiences of Early Start were mediated through work arrangements that differed in terms of the number and type of schools in which they are involved. More than half of the coordinators (N=18) who returned questionnaires carried out their responsibilities in one (Early Start) school, a further 14 divided their time between two schools, and one worked in three schools. In cases where two schools were involved, 7 coordinators identified their second school as either the senior school associated with the junior school (N=6) or the boys' school associated with the girls' school where Early Start was located (N=1); a further 6 coordinators reported that their time was divided between one Early Start school and one non-Early Start school, while one indicated that both of the schools were Early Start schools. The time of the coordinator who was involved with three schools was shared between one Early Start school and two non-Early Start schools. This means that the total number of Early Start schools served by the 33 responding HSCL coordinators was 34, and that responses were received from coordinators in all but 6 of the 40 Early Start schools. While an additional 8 non-Early Start schools were served by the coordinators, HSCL responsibilities in these schools were not examined in the questionnaire.

Apart from differences between coordinators arising from the numbers and types of schools in which they are deployed, work loads were also found to vary in terms of the numbers of Early Start places in schools. In one of the coordinators' schools, there were only 15 Early Start places but, in the remainder, that number was doubled (in 17 schools) or quadrupled (in 16 schools). In 2004/05, all of the available places were filled in 31 of the 34 schools for which figures were returned. In one of two schools where Early Start places were undersubscribed, 8 of the 30 places were

not filled and in the other, which had provision for 60 Early Start pupils, 5 places were not filled. In a third school, which had 30 Early Start places, the relevant figures were not returned.

A fairly high rate of progression from Early Start to junior infants (within the same school) was reported. Twenty-five coordinators indicated that at least 60% of Early Start pupils progressed to junior infants in their school (or schools in one case), with 8 of these reporting that all Early Start pupils do so; the remaining 7 indicated that at least 40% of Early Start pupils transferred to junior infants.

Differences between respondents emerged with regard to the number of years that they had worked as coordinators. More than four-fifths (N=27) had worked in their current role for less than 6 years and one-third (N=11) had less than 2 years coordinating experience when they were completing the questionnaire. The longest-serving coordinator had about 10 years experience. On average, respondents had worked as coordinators for just over 4 (4.3) years. A similar profile of experience emerges in relation to the number of years worked as coordinators in Early Start schools, reflecting the fact that virtually all of their coordinating experience was gained in schools with Early Start.

Collectively, the coordinators had worked with 91 Early Start teachers. Individually, however, many of them (N=19) had worked with only one or two Early Start teachers. The average number of Early Start teachers with whom coordinators had worked is just 2.8, though 6 of the coordinators had worked with a total of 4 different Early Start teachers while a further 4 of their colleagues had worked with as many as 5, 6, or even 7 Early Start teachers.

From the details supplied in the questionnaire, it seems that the typical profile of a HSCL coordinator in Early Start schools is someone (usually female -- only two respondents were male) with about 4 years coordinating experience who has worked with two or more Early Start teachers in a school with 30 or 60 Early Start places. The most experienced coordinators were involved in 2 schools, one with 60 Early Start places, had 8 to 10 years coordinating experience, and had worked with 5, 6, or 7 Early Start teachers. The least experienced coordinator completed the questionnaire

within a year of being appointed to a school with 15 Early Start places. In most cases, coordinators could expect to continue to work with a high proportion of Early Start pupils who transferred to junior-infant classes in their schools.

## **II Coordinators' Description of their Role in Early Start**

A key incentive for carrying out the present inquiry was that very little is known about the day-to-day involvement of HSCL coordinators in Early Start. Previous evaluations of HSCL did not focus on Early Start at all, while Early Start evaluations focussed largely on the development and implementation of the programme and its outcomes for participants without much reference to other initiatives. There is, however, a chapter in the first evaluation report (Educational Research Centre, 1998) on parent involvement for which HSCL coordinators contributed data. In this section of the report, a description of the coordinators' role in Early Start is provided. Information is provided on Early Start activities undertaken by coordinators in 2004/05, the proportion of time devoted to Early Start in that year, and aspects of work coordinators would like to prioritise in future. An account of the perceptions of coordinators of their role in Early Start, and how it compares with other aspects of their work in the school, is also presented.

### **Early Start activities in 2004/05**

One way of finding out about how coordinators worked to support Early Start was to ask them to identify any activities undertaken specifically in relation to Early Start during the school year, with reference to their involvement with parents, pupils, teachers, other professionals, or local representatives or groups. The question was posed in an open-ended format and responses were subsequently coded into 7 main categories and 34 sub-categories, reflecting the varied nature of the work. Results for the main categories are presented in Table 1 and details on the sub-categories are given in the text.

Planned parent involvement at the school. The single largest category of activities which coordinators undertook as part of their work in Early Start related to planned activities for parents at the school. Activities in this category were mentioned 78 times by 30 coordinators (Table 1). Entries were recorded under 9 sub-categories. In order of frequency, these are: health talks – dental, public health, first aid,

Table 1: Early Start activities undertaken in 2004/2005, by number of coordinators and number of mentions

Early Start Activity	No. of Coordinators	No. of Mentions
Planned parent involvement	30	78
School or community events	21	35
Staff liaison	20	27
Promotional activities	12	13
Home visits	10	14
Informal parent contact at the school	6	6
Parent-to-parent contact	5	6

speech therapy (16 mentions); talks on children’s education – art and craft, story-telling, music-making, computers, maths for fun, literacy and numeracy (13 mentions); parent induction – first school meeting (12 mentions); parenting talks – child development and play (11 mentions); parent classroom involvement (11 mentions); adult education – literacy, numeracy, art and craft, cookery, gardening, computers, and personal development (8 mentions); parent introduction to community resources – library, creche, language classes for non-national parents (5 mentions); and toy or book exchange (2 mentions).

School or community events. Arranging school or community events involving Early Start children and their parents is another type of activity which many coordinators (a total of 21) reported having invested time in during 2004/2005. Seven event sub-categories and 35 counts or mentions emerged from the coordinators’ responses. The most popular events are non-school based, i.e., day trips and outings, a sub-category which attracted 14 mentions. It was followed by parties and celebrations (8 mentions); shows and concerts (4 mentions); open days (3 mentions); sports days (3 mentions); library visits (2 mentions); and art days (1 mention).

Staff liaison. Twenty coordinators mentioned staff liaison to address a variety of different aspects of Early Start as part of the work they had undertaken in 2004/2005. The total number of counts is 27 which are spread across 7 sub-categories:



unspecified (8 mentions); Early Years integration (6 mentions); Early Start/junior infants transfer (4 mentions); Early Start selection and enrolment (4 mentions); targeting families (3 mentions); encouraging parental participation (1 mention); and joint activities (e.g., swimming, computers) for parents and children (1 mention).

Promotional activities. Promotional activities were identified by 12 coordinators as work undertaken by them during 2004/2005 in relation to Early Start. Most of the work included in this category involved distributing educational materials, e.g., a literacy pack or the CLOVER gift pack to parents (8 mentions). The category also includes promotion of HSCL courses (4 mentions) and of Early Start open days (1 mention).

Home visits. Ten coordinators described their work activities for Early Start as home visits. A number of purposes were ascribed to the visits: to encourage parent participation (3 mentions); to make contact with parents of Early Start entrants (1 mention); to encourage better attendance (1 mention); to discuss settling in issues (1 mention); to discuss transfer to junior infants (1 mention); to follow up on non-attendance of parents at meetings (1 mention). Six mentions of unspecified reasons are also a feature of these data.

Informal parent contact at the school. Some of the activities described by coordinators in relation to Early Start involved meeting with parents informally at drop-off and collection times (4 mentions) or at coffee mornings in the school (2 mentions). Only 6 coordinators identified such activities as part of their work, however.

Parent-to-parent contact. Facilitating parent-to-parent contact was done by arranging home visits between parents (1 mention), by training parents to organise an induction course for new parents (4 mentions), and by facilitating implementation of the induction course (1 mention). Only 5 coordinators mentioned these activities.

For additional information about their involvement in Early Start, coordinators were asked to outline the main features of their approach in 2004/05 beginning in September and ending in June. An open-ended format was also used for this question,

and following preliminary analysis, responses were coded on a scale of 1-5 (1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = good; 4 = very good and 5 = excellent). Ratings were awarded depending on the extent to which responses revealed evidence of a cycle of increasingly focussed activity to support parent involvement. In particular, the texts were read in search of feedback that conveyed a sense of building relationships early in the school year, through daily informal contact with parents, leading towards inviting, encouraging, and supporting parent involvement in the school and identifying need for additional targeted support. In practical terms, such an approach might be reflected in welcoming parents when they arrive at the school in September and in the use of that initial contact to encourage attendance at school talks and participation in children's events, outings, and classroom activities. In the second and third terms, the coordinator might devote more time to home visits to encourage additional contact, target attendance problems, and stimulate interest in child/adult literacy. Towards the end of the year, in May or June, a shift in the focus of the coordinator towards the needs of incoming participants might be expected.

The description of a HSCL coordinator's role in Early Start, as outlined above, is based on the texts produced by coordinators themselves. When analysing the texts, it was possible to assign ratings of 'good' (N=15) or 'very good' (N=6) to more than three-fifths of cases. Thus, a fair amount of unity of purpose was found to exist among coordinators in relation to how they described their work. Only one coordinator received a rating of 1 (poor) and the remainder (N=11) were assigned a rating of 2 (fair). 'Fair' ratings were assigned when activities involving parents were reported but evidence of a cycle of focussed activity was missing. 'Good' ratings tended to be assigned when a cycle of focussed activity was indicated but details of follow-through support for problems were omitted. Some coordinators appeared to be quite proactive in this regard, however, and it is this attention to additional support which differentiates those who were assigned 'good' from those assigned 'very good' ratings. For a rating of 'excellent' to be assigned, evidence was required that coordinators had gone beyond dealing with problems of attendance or social behaviour and were working with parents and children on improving educational outcomes (e.g., child and/or adult literacy).

Most coordinators implemented 'more or less the same plan' with each new cohort of Early Start parents. More than two-thirds (N=23) indicated that they had done so. Only 4 said that they had implemented 'a different plan' while, in the remainder of cases (N=6), coordinators were still in their first year of appointment. In further elaboration, one coordinator explained that there had been little or no change in recent years because the school had arrived at a formula that worked. This involved providing opportunities for brief periods of parent-child interaction at the beginning and end of sessions. Seven coordinators mentioned that their contacts and ideas were still evolving, while two pointed to changes in school circumstances (e.g., personnel changes and an increasingly multi-cultural pupil intake) that had caused them to revise their plans. In another case, the poor attendance of parents at information talks had resulted in the implementation of a more activity-based approach while, in another, the coordinator expressed frustration at the lack of a whole-school approach that might have allowed her to draw up and implement a plan.

The amount of time devoted to Early Start by coordinators increased between 2003/04 and 2004/05. When asked to estimate the time they had given to Early Start in 2004/05 compared to the previous year (in terms of 'greater than', 'less than', or 'the same as') half of the coordinators perceived Early Start as having taken up more of their time. Of the remainder, all but one indicated that they had given the same amount of time to Early Start in both years.

More than half the coordinators elaborated on their allocation of time to Early Start. The time devoted to it had increased for a number of reasons. Dealing with parents of non-national origin accounted for the additional time in one case; in another, expansion of Early Start was cited as a factor which had led to an increase in workload. Coordinators also noted the influence of in-career development (N=4) which had strengthened their involvement in Early Start, made them aware that parents of young children were more open to intervention than parents of older children, and underlined the importance of the school staff working as a team. In other cases, coordinators saw the increase in time devoted to Early Start simply as a progression of their involvement in activities with parents and children and/or of their relationship with teachers (N=4). Where the time devoted to Early Start had not increased, coordinators reported that obligations in other schools (N=3) or elsewhere

(N=3) had prevented them from doing so, though one concluded that additional time from her was unnecessary because of the competence of the Early Start staff.

### **Coordinators’ experience of their role in Early Start**

In a question designed to elicit information about coordinators’ perceptions of their role in Early Start, respondents were asked to describe the development of their role since their appointment. Specifically, they were asked to comment on the extent to which they perceived their role to have become 1) ‘easier’ or ‘more difficult’ 2) ‘clearer’ or ‘more uncertain’ and 3) ‘routinised’ or ‘more varied’. In each case, the response options also included ‘remained much the same’ and ‘too soon to judge’.

Coordinators generally reported positive experiences of their role in Early Start. More than two-thirds (N=23) indicated that, since becoming involved, they were ‘clearer’ about the nature of their involvement (Table 2). The consensus about clarity of role is further underlined by the fact that only 2 coordinators disagreed with this opinion; others indicated that the role had ‘remained much the same’ (N=3) or that it was ‘too soon to judge’ (N=4). Another positive indication of coordinators’ satisfaction with their involvement in Early Start is that more than half (N=19) agreed that the work had become ‘more varied’. A small number of others did not share this view, however, reporting that the work had become ‘routinised’ (N=6). Still more polarised views emerged in relation to the extent to which the work was perceived to have become ‘easier’ or ‘more difficult’ with one-third of coordinators agreeing with the former and one-third with the latter. When asked to elaborate, however, there was little evidence that coordinators associated difficulty with their role in Early Start with

Table 2: Perception of role in Early Start, by number of coordinators

Perceived Development of HSCL Role in Early Start since Appointment				Total
Easier 11	More difficult 11	Remained the same 5	Too soon to judge 6	33
Clearer 23	More uncertain 2	Remained the same 3	Too soon to judge 4	32
Routinised 6	More varied 19	Remained the same 3	Too soon to judge 4	32

job dissatisfaction. On the contrary, only 5 were negative or critical in their comments. Feedback about their role in Early Start from the majority of coordinators reflected a process of adjustment and learning (N=21) and included a sense of achievement in some cases (N=15) and confidence or optimism in others (N=4).

Additional observations from a number of coordinators suggest that their positive feedback was linked to a perception that earlier efforts to involve parents were now paying dividends. A rapport with parents had been built up over the years, some of whom are revisiting Early Start with younger children. In-career provision for school principals, in which the role of the HSCL coordinator was clarified, also attracted positive feedback. As a result of the message conveyed, coordinators reported having more of a say in Early Start, a development which they welcomed. The small number of negative views that were expressed tended to reflect a perception that the school as a whole, or at least some of its staff, were not supportive of home-school-community liaison (e.g., one coordinator stressed the need for guidance in developing a plan for her involvement in Early Start that would involve all staff in the school).

In relation to 'having a say', coordinators were asked to rate the extent of involvement of each of a number of personnel (the school principal, an Early Start teacher, a childcare worker, they themselves, and parents) in initiating activity involving the coordinator in Early Start. Response options on a scale of 1-5 (always = 1; frequently = 2; sometimes = 3; rarely = 4; never = 5) were provided. Analysis of mean scores indicates that Early Start teachers were perceived as being most frequently involved in initiating such activity (M = 1.67). They were followed jointly by coordinators and childcare workers (M = 1.85). Principals were perceived as being involved to a lesser extent (M = 2.70) while parents were perceived as being the least involved (M = 3.06). A number of coordinators identified other persons or groups whom they perceived as being involved in initiating HSCL activity in Early Start. These included health service personnel, i.e., speech therapists, public health nurses, dental nurses (N=5); other unspecified staff in the school (N=2); an intercultural teacher (N=1); 'the education disadvantage initiative' (N=1); the School Completion Programme and music therapy (N=1).

### **Work in Early Start compared to work with older pupils**

Coordinators are divided in their opinions on the extent to which their work in Early Start differed from their work with older pupils and their families. A majority (N=19) indicated that their work in Early Start was ‘not much different’ from what they did in the rest of the primary school(s). Others disagreed, indicating that it was ‘different’ (N=10) or ‘very different’ (N=4). Additional comments from this group of coordinators suggest that, compared with their work with older pupils and their families, they perceived their role in Early Start more positively. Relationships between themselves and Early Start parents were described as less formal but more developed, and problems with pupils were reported to be fewer. Many of those who indicated that the work in Early Start was ‘not much different’ elaborated by describing their involvement with Early Start parents as the same but more intensive (N=14). A number of reasons for the increased contact were identified, including a perception that the needs of Early Start parents for support are greater because they are younger, more unsure, and are concerned about their child’s first year in school. Alternatively, Early Start parents were described as being more enthusiastic than the parents of older children who, though, also perceived as needing help (e.g., in dealing with negative attitudes to school) were regarded as being more difficult to reach. In some cases, this was attributed to the characteristics of the parents (who, it was felt, may feel intimidated approaching classrooms or whose availability is diminished due to increased work commitments ‘particularly after their child reaches the age of seven’); in others, coordinators identified the nature of Early Start with its emphasis on parent involvement as a factor that may explain their greater involvement with Early Start parents than with parents of older children.

When comparing Early Start parents with other parents in the school in terms of level of disadvantage, more than three-quarters of coordinators indicated that both groups were ‘about the same’ (N=26), while the remaining seven reported that Early Start parents were ‘more disadvantaged’. In relation to openness to involvement, however, differences between both groups of parents were perceived with more than three-quarters of coordinators (N=26) indicating that Early Start parents were ‘more open to involvement’ than other parents in the school. When asked to identify what strategies, if any, they had used to deal with such differences, just under half of the coordinators (N=14) responded in one of two ways: by indicating either that

strategies are not necessary as Early Start parents are so willing to be involved (N=8) or that they had developed relationships with Early Start parents at drop-off and/or collection times (N=6). Clearly, coordinators interpreted the question in relation to their contacts with Early Start parents, and reported on the success of these, rather than on the difficulties they had encountered with parents who might have been reluctant to interact with the school.

### **Rewarding and challenging aspects of the role**

Despite the difficulty of reaching some parents, when specifically asked to name the aspects of their work which they found most rewarding, more than half of the coordinators (N=17) mentioned working with parents. A further seven mentioned their involvement with parents and Early Start teachers jointly, while four mentioned parents and Early Start children. These are the rewarding aspects of the role of coordinator, which were the most frequently mentioned. By way of explanation, coordinators noted that they enjoyed watching parents becoming involved, giving parents a voice, visiting homes, being known by parents, and parent feedback. Comments about working with Early Start teachers included references to a sense of teamwork with school personnel who were ‘tuned into parents’.

When coordinators were asked to name the most difficult aspects of their role, they most frequently mentioned issues of time management (N=9), involvement of all parents, particularly of those who live in new housing estates (N=7), and parent characteristics (N=6). Time management issues arose in cases where coordinators were shared between schools but were also mentioned in relation to prioritising between families within schools and/or between teachers within schools. Parent characteristics identified as problematic include the age profile (described as young and immature), the extent of disadvantage, and poor attitudes to Early Start/school. The latter were reflected in non-commitment to delivery and collection of children, in poor attendance of children, and in a perceived ‘taking for granted’ of the service provided, according to coordinators. Particular groups of parents were also seen as presenting difficulty: part-time working mothers who were perceived as not being as available for interaction with school personnel as mothers who were not in paid employment; grandparents who delivered and collected children but who were perceived as having little interest in the life and work of the school; and parents who

had little or no English. When asked to identify any supports in the school or community that might help them to deal with the issues they raised, none of the coordinators commented.

### **Immediate plans**

Most of the coordinators (N=27) identified aspects of their work that they would like to give more time to in the following school year (2005/06). Reflecting the scope of the role of coordinator, four different aspects of work relating to curriculum, adult education, home visits, and work with minority groups were identified. The most frequently mentioned priority that coordinators would like to attend to relates to developing parents as educators in language development, reading and maths (N=10). More general expressions of interest in curriculum included a wish to have more families involved in classroom activities (N=2) and time to develop an Early Years programme (N=1). Of those coordinators who stated a preference for involvement in adult education, some identified school-based courses for parents (N=2) while others simply referred to activities with parents (N=3) as priorities they would like to have more time for. Other coordinators mentioned more structured home visits (N=3) and interventions involving work with travellers (N=1) and non-national parents (N=1) as their preferred work priorities for 2005/06.

### **III The Impact of HSCL on Early Start**

In this section, feedback is presented on coordinators' perceptions of the contribution of the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme to Early Start, focussing on the key issues of enrolment, attendance, and parent involvement.

#### **Enrolment**

Most coordinators regard themselves as having 'some' (N=10) or 'a lot' of involvement in enrolments for Early Start (N=18); only two indicated that they had 'no' involvement in Early Start enrolments. Of the 28 who indicated involvement in the identification of potential participants, 27 provided further information on 1) the number of potential participants they had identified in 2004/05, and 2) the number of these who had subsequently enrolled. Reflecting differences between schools in the numbers of Early Start pupils catered for, a great deal of variation emerged with regard to the numbers of potential participants identified by coordinators. While the



numbers identified range from 3 to 54 (the average is 13.3), more than 6 in 10 of the involved coordinators (N=17) reported that they had identified just 9, or fewer than 9, potential participants. About the same number (N=19) reported that 9, or fewer than 9, of the potential participants identified had subsequently enrolled in Early Start. In the case of enrolments, values range from 3 to 30 and the average value is 12.2.

Coordinators generally reported satisfaction with the extent of their involvement in Early Start enrolments. Most (N=28) agreed that they have sufficient say in the process while just four indicated otherwise. One of the four, while suggesting that the school principal may not have been sufficiently aware of the potential role of the HSCL coordinator, thought that the issue might be resolved by drawing attention to it during in-service training. Others identified personal characteristics (being new to the job) (N=1) and criteria for admission to Early Start (e.g., sibling in school) as factors that had a limiting influence on their involvement in enrolment (N=1).

Coordinators were 'satisfied' (N=8) or 'very satisfied' (N=23) that Early Start places were being filled by the most disadvantaged children in the school catchment area. Only two dissented from this opinion. A small number of coordinators documented problems encountered in their schools in efforts to reach the target group. These included lack of awareness on the part of the school principal; difficulty in judging the truthfulness of applications despite the advantage of local knowledge and home visits; competition from local crèches which open for longer hours and provide lunch; oversubscription by non-national parents 'who always apply first'; difficulty in refusing access to applicants who were very disadvantaged because of insufficient places; and problems in retaining the most disadvantaged children who were not always toilet trained and whose parents could not cope or commit to delivery and collection times.

### **Attendance**

Attendance rates in Early Start had improved over the ten-year life span of the intervention according to a majority of coordinators (N=19), though nearly one-third reported that these were 'much the same' (N=10). Only one coordinator indicated that attendance rates were now 'worse' than they had been while two others reported

that, due to their recent appointments to the position of HSCL coordinator, they ‘did not know’. More than two-thirds agreed, however, that the HSCL scheme had been ‘successful’ (N=14) or ‘very successful’ (N=9) in improving attendance rates in Early Start. Six reported that they ‘did not know’ while a further two said that the scheme had been ‘unsuccessful’ in this regard.

Thirty coordinators responded to a question about strategies they had used to improve attendance rates in Early Start in 2004/05. One in two of these (N=15) identified a strategy that involved a visit by the coordinator to the home of a pupil with poor attendance. A further nine reported that responsibility for contact with parents about attendance issues was shared between staff (usually the school principal, the coordinator, and teachers) though child care workers and the school secretary were included in two cases. In three cases, the strategies involved providing incentives of one sort or another (prizes, certificates, a place on Early Start for a younger child) while, in the remaining three cases, coordinators indicated that, since attendance was not a problem in their schools, no strategies were required to deal with it (Table 3). When asked to comment on the extent to which the strategies had worked, 26 coordinators gave feedback which was subsequently grouped into three main categories: successful (attendance improved); partially successful (attendance improved to a limited extent depending on circumstances and/or reasons for

Table 3: Number of coordinators who identified strategies used to target attendance problems in Early Start (2004/05) and perceived outcomes

Strategy for Attendance Problems	Perceived Outcome of Strategy				
	Successful	Partially Successful	Not Successful	Not Applicable	Total
Home visit (N=15)	10	2	2		14
Staff share responsibility (N=9)	4	1	1		6
Incentive (N=3)	2	1			3
No problem (N=3)				3	3
Total (N=30)	16	4	3	3	26

non-attendance); and unsuccessful (attendance improved immediately after intervention but then reverted to previous level). There is no evidence from these data, based, it should be noted, on a small number of observations, that any one of the three strategies identified by coordinators was more or less successful than the other two in targeting attendance problems in Early Start.

### **Parent involvement**

Coordinators were positive about the success of the HSCL scheme in improving parent involvement. While a number of coordinators (N=6) claimed not to know if the scheme had been successful in this regard, most indicated (N=27) that it had been ‘successful’ (N=16) or ‘very successful’ (N=11). All of the 27 who did so, identified at least one HSCL strategy that had worked particularly well in their school and which they would recommend to other schools. The strategies mentioned were subsequently grouped into 7 categories: parent-child learning activities, distribution by teachers to parents of learning support materials (e.g., literacy packs), distribution by parents to parents of learning support materials (toys, books), home visits, provision of school-based crèche facilities, parent participation in extra-curricular activities, quality and timing of contact (Table 4).

The most popular category of strategies (mentioned 14 times) was parent-child learning activities. These are ones in which teachers first demonstrate to parents how

Table 4: Successful parent involvement strategies that coordinators (N=27) would recommend to other schools with Early Start, by number of mentions

Strategy for Parent Involvement	Number of Mentions
Parent-child learning activities	14
Quality and timing of contact	12
Parent participation in extra-curricular activities	7
Home visits	6
School-based crèche facilities	3
Parent-to-parent learning support materials	3
Teacher-to-parent learning support materials	2
Other	4

to promote learning in play (2), reading (1), maths (4), story-telling (1), language development (1), and unspecified activities (5) and parents then work, under supervision, with their child on a one-to-one basis. The quality and timing of contact attracted almost as many mentions (12) and included several practical tips for encouraging parent contact. Making the most of drop-off times (3) and keeping in touch with parents generally by 'meet and greet' tactics (3) were each mentioned a few times. Others advised arranging an induction meeting or course for parents in the year prior to their child's entry or at the beginning of the year (4). One coordinator recommended that initial contact be made in person rather than by post, while another suggested that events should be organised early in the school year for maximum benefit. Parent participation in extra-curricular activities was mentioned seven times and included school talks (5), out-of-school trips (1), and reading for fun adult literacy programmes (1) while home visits, early in the school year (1), by coordinators (4), and by parents (1) were mentioned just six times. Strategies in other categories – distribution of learning support materials (of literacy packs by teachers to parents and of toys and books by parents to parents) and provision of school-based crèche facilities – were less frequently mentioned. An 'other' category has 4 strategies that could not be included in any of the 7 categories described. One of these, a free raffle to encourage attendance at meetings, underlines the difficulty of getting some parents involved and the lengths to which staff in a school may be prepared to go to find ways of overcoming the difficulty.

Given their experience of working in designated disadvantaged schools, coordinators were asked for their views on what might be done to improve the participation of the most marginalised parents in (a) Early Start and (b) the rest of the school. Nearly all had something to suggest in relation to both Early Start (N=27) and the rest of the school (N=26). As many as 23 different suggestions emerged from the analysis of responses, though the range of responses to both parts of the question is more or less the same and most are mentioned only once or twice (Table 5). A number of coordinators identified a very basic need for more contact with parents, however, either in the school yard or in home visits. This is the case in relation to both Early Start (N=4) and the rest of the school (N=5). Other small groups of coordinators expressed their appreciation of two perceived successes of the Early Start experience and recommended introducing similar approaches to the rest of the

school. One has to do with involving parents and children in joint learning activities (N=4), the other with mainstreaming aspects of the Early Start curriculum (including reading to a child when the child is also looking at the book, maths for fun, and approaches to music and art) into the learning experiences of older pupils (N=4). In relation to Early Start, coordinators (N=3) recommended increasing the amount of time devoted to language development by extending the morning sessions which are generally better attended by parents than afternoon sessions. An increase in HSCL input to Early Start was also recommended (N=3) either by increasing the number of hours provided by existing personnel or by the appointment of additional personnel.

Table 5: Strategies for improving the participation of the most marginalised parents in (a) Early Start and (b) the rest of the school, by number of coordinators

Strategies	Early Start	Rest of School
Make school more welcoming		1
Encourage teachers to be more open to parents		1
Increase contacts with parents in school yard or in home visits	4	5
Invite parents to whole-school celebrations	1	
Put up a parents' notice board		1
Increase parents' awareness of own role	2	1
Include role models from less marginalised groups in parenting courses	1	1
Use marginalised parents to reach others	1	
Provide creche facilities to release parent/mother	2	1
Provide more family support/home help services	2	
Provide family therapist/school counsellor		1
Provide staff in-service by expert on HSCL partnership role		1
Provide more staff in-service about disadvantage		1
Increase HSCL personnel/hours to full-time	3	
Provide resources to give pupils a proper lunch	1	
Increase support for travellers and help foster good habits	1	
Provide more parent-child learning activities—emphasize doing		4
Spend more time on language development. Increase ES time (begin at 9 am as minimal parent involvement in afternoon)	3	
Encourage ES staff to welcome unscheduled parent visits	1	
Brief parents on ES objectives and expected outcomes	1	
Brief parents on curriculum /give help with maths and reading		2
Mainstream aspects of ES (art, music, shared reading, maths for fun, language development) for older pupils		4
Identify interests of most marginalised and plan accordingly	1	1
Systemic change to reduce poverty and increase adult literacy	1	1

### **Attitudes of parents and teachers to each other**

Recognising that HSCL coordinators, as participant observers in Early Start, are in a position to observe interaction between parents and teachers, it was decided to include a number of questions on this issue. An attempt was made to explore coordinators' views of how increased parent involvement had impacted a) on parents' attitudes to teachers and the education of their children and b) on teachers' attitudes to parents and their interaction with children.

Coordinators agreed that the involvement of parents of Early Start pupils had impacted 'a lot' (N=22) or to 'some' extent (N=11) on parents' attitudes to teachers. The other response options 'to a little extent', 'none', and 'don't know' were not chosen by coordinators. Most of the commentary is positive (N=22), some is mixed (N=4), and there is very little negative feedback (N=1). The mainly positive views of coordinators were expressed in the following ways: 'the barriers between parents and teachers are broken down...there is a genuine partnership between parents and teachers....parents appreciate the resources and ambience of the classroom....parents are more aware and appreciative of teachers' expertise'. Mixed views reflected concern about the proportion of parents benefiting from Early Start: 'involvement in Early Start benefits some parents but not enough parents are involved enough to have an impact on their attitudes to teachers...only some parents are willing to get involved'. Doubts were also expressed about the lasting effects of benefits which, it was suggested, 'may not be sustained if the next teacher is not as welcoming'. One negative comment focussed on parents' perception of Early Start as 'free child care' and teachers' resentment of this.

Coordinators were somewhat less positive about the impact of Early Start on parents' attitudes to their children's education. About half indicated that involvement in Early Start had impacted 'a lot' (N=16), while a further third (N=11) indicated that there had been 'some' impact on parents' attitudes to education. Three coordinators indicated that this had happened only to a 'little' extent, two others said that they 'did not know' and two declined to answer. Of the 28 coordinators who provided additional feedback, 14 responded positively. In their comments, they observed that 'parents develop good habits of attendance and punctuality...gain appreciation of language development and the value of play...consult teachers about

reading...understand the system better and gain appreciation of their own role as educators...develop higher expectations for their children...expect more from the school including lower pupil-teacher ratios in junior infants.’ The views of a further eleven coordinators could be described as mixed. Their comments again reflect doubt about the proportions of parents benefiting from Early Start and concern about the most marginalised parents: ‘most parents have a positive attitude in the early years but it becomes more and more difficult for them to maintain this in the face of deprivation and minimal support...*some* of the Early Start parents become more involved in subsequent years...those who do participate learn a lot about basic educational practices...benefits are not sustained because parents feel they lack the ability to deal with the education of their older children...parents are polarised and it is very difficult to engage the marginalised...the most marginalised need extra support (more teachers, smaller classes) from the school as their children progress.’ Negative comment from just one coordinator questioned the motivation of parents: ‘most parents are not interested in the educational impact of Early Start but are more concerned about their children being able to mix socially in a group environment’.

In a question about the extent to which their views on parents had been influenced by feedback from parents, coordinators could select ‘a lot’, ‘some’, ‘a little’ or ‘none’ as a response option. More than 6 in 10 coordinators (N=21) selected ‘a lot’ while a further 7 opted for ‘some’. Two declined to answer and the remainder selected ‘a little’ (N=2) or ‘none’ (N=1).

Almost two-thirds of coordinators (N=21) thought that the demands of parent involvement had impacted ‘a lot’ on the attitudes of Early Start teachers, while most of the rest (N=6) thought that this had occurred to ‘some’ extent. Half of the 24 coordinators who provided additional feedback had mainly positive comments: ‘the teacher sees the child in the context of his or her family...the teacher is more understanding of family strengths and weaknesses and of the extent of disadvantage...the teacher comes to view parents as essential to child’s educational success...teachers enjoy having parents in the class and are open to their involvement...despite difficulties with individual parents, teachers take parental involvement in their stride and are positive about it’. While some of the feedback is somewhat vague (N=3), comments from a further 9 coordinators could be classified

as mainly mixed. This group thought that ‘staff attitudes are very positive but some parents are very difficult and/or unreliable to work with...teachers see the value of parents’ involvement but also that it tends not to continue...teachers gain important insight on family circumstances and/or needs but get disheartened and frustrated at parents’ lack of initiative, commitment, esteem...teachers get tired of doing everything for the parent...more individual attention is given to the children but there can be too many people in the room (staff, parents, and work-experience student)?’.

Just under half of the coordinators (N=16) agreed that the demands of parent involvement had impacted ‘a lot’ on classroom interaction between teachers and children. Most of the rest were prepared to indicate that this had occurred to ‘some’ extent (N=8) or to ‘a little’ (N=3) extent while a number of others selected the ‘don’t know’ option (N=4) or declined to answer (N=2). Five of the coordinators who gave additional information observed positive interaction: ‘teacher treats children with more tolerance, understanding and sympathy due to greater knowledge of family circumstances ... educational programmes are more individually tailored...teachers are better able to help parents to help their child.’ Another coordinator made the point that ‘it can sometimes be difficult to correct children when a parent is present.’

In more than two-thirds of cases (N=23), coordinators indicated that their views on the attitudes and interactions of Early Start teachers had been influenced ‘a lot’ by feedback from Early Start teachers, while a further six indicated that their views had been influenced to ‘some’ extent. The remainder indicated ‘a little’ (N=1), ‘none’ (N=2), or declined to answer (N=1).

#### **IV The Impact of Early Start on HSCL**

There was a good deal of support among coordinators for the view that Early Start had improved the involvement of parents in subsequent years as their child/children progressed through the school. Twenty were prepared to report that ‘a lot’ of improvement in parent involvement had occurred as a result of the Early Start intervention, while a further five agreed that Early Start had facilitated ‘some’ such improvement. Four others thought that only ‘a little’ improvement had occurred and the remaining four indicated that they were unsure of the contribution of Early Start to



subsequent parent involvement. In three of the ‘don’t know’ cases, coordinators were new to their positions (i.e., they had one year or less than one year of experience).

Further commentary from nearly two-thirds of coordinators overwhelmingly supported their initial positive appraisal of the effect of Early Start on subsequent parent involvement. For one thing, general attitudes to school were reported to have improved. Even though some parents were considered ‘too busy’ to be involved, coordinators perceived good will for school initiatives and policies from parents whose children had been through Early Start. Support from these parents was evident in well-attended parent-teacher meetings and in the ways in which they received advice (gratefully) and saw the school as helping their children. At the same time, differences between parents were perceived to exist with regard to the extent of their involvement. In some cases, involvement was simply reflected in a willingness to enter the school building and to talk informally with staff or discuss a problem (N=2); in others it extended to participation in school administration (committees, boards of management) or parents’ associations (N=4). It was not unusual for a core group of supporters to form during the Early Start year and to remain supportive as their children progressed through the school. In particular, it was observed that Early Start parents who delivered activities at classroom level were more inclined to sustain their involvement. A few coordinators were non-committal in their views on this subject (N=4), while a similarly small number were of the opinion that parent involvement fell away after the Early Start experience. The latter was attributed to parents being more confident in school when children are younger, to parents developing other interests outside the school, and/or to diminishing opportunities for parents to work individually with children as they progress. Several coordinators reported that there was more subsequent involvement from some Early Start parents, but that there were others (usually the ‘most marginalised’) who did not get involved (N=6). In spite of these reservations, however, the message from coordinators was that sooner is better than later when it comes to establishing good relations between parents and the school. Early Start was perceived as a good opportunity for that process of mutual engagement to begin.

Coordinators were asked to what extent, and in what ways, their involvement in Early Start had impacted on other HSCL responsibilities. Response options, ‘a lot’,

‘some’, ‘a little’, ‘none’, and ‘don’t know’ were provided. Most coordinators agreed that their involvement in Early Start had impacted ‘a lot’ (N=18) or to ‘some’ extent (N=11) on other HSCL responsibilities. Of those who elaborated (N=22), two coordinators commented that the ‘prioritising’ of Early Start had increased their work load and resulted in other parts of HSCL being ‘undeveloped’. The elaborations of the remaining 20 coordinators were positive. (Table 6). Six gave details of how contact with Early Start families had increased their opportunity to identify disadvantage from a very early stage and to introduce ‘realistic’ intervention. A further five explained that benefits accrued from initial positive contact when parents were ‘most open and eager’ and that goodwill established at an early stage was helpful as children progressed, impressed other staff, and gained support for interventions later on. Another five perceived their experiences in Early Start as having helped them to increase contacts with community workers and agencies (e.g., public health nurses, speech therapists, librarians, educational welfare officers, gardai and Barnardos). Others (N=4) mentioned some combination of these in their responses.

Table 6: Positive outcomes of involvement with Early Start families, as elaborated by coordinators (N=20)

Involvement in Early Start had increased opportunity:	
To identify disadvantage and introduce early intervention	6
To make contact with parents and build support for intervention	5
To increase contact with community groups and agencies	5
To progress on some or all of the above	4

## V The integration of Early Start in Early Years Provision

In the past couple of years, in-career development for Early Start providers has raised the issue of greater integration of Early Start with the junior and senior infant classes in primary schools. Rather than issuing a set of guidelines to all Early Start schools, the approach to date has been one in which school personnel have been asked to consider ways forward for themselves on a school-by-school basis. Since HSCL coordinators have responsibilities across grades in primary schools, they are in a relatively good position from which to observe any developments regarding Early

Start integration. Accordingly, they were asked to give an indication of the extent to which changes had taken place in their school and to provide a description of the changes introduced.

Analysis of responses to an initial question about the extent of changes introduced revealed that just under half of the coordinators (N=15) were prepared to indicate that 'a lot' (N=4) or 'some' (N=11) adaptations had been made with regard to Early Start integration. Apart from two coordinators who did not respond, the remainder reported that 'a few' (N=9) or no (N=7) changes had been introduced to date. Five of the seven who reported no changes also said that plans for change were being put in place for next year or, at the very least, that talks were in progress.

Twenty-four coordinators proceeded to describe a total of 13 types of adaptation/response which had already been introduced in their schools. Four of the adaptations were mentioned several times. The most frequently mentioned relates to curriculum (N=9) and seems to have involved, at the very least, some collaboration between teachers in Early Start and in junior infants, though, specific changes to the junior infants curriculum regarding language and play were also noted. This was followed, in order of frequency, by dedicated meetings, involving teachers in Early Start and in junior infants, to discuss common concerns including transfer issues (N=8). The third most frequently cited adaptation which coordinators regarded as facilitating integration of Early Start with Early Years provision relates to sharing of equipment (N=7). Materials, books, and toys were included in this context. Visits by teachers, from one classroom to another, were also regarded as facilitating integration (N=6). Apart from some joint activities (e.g., school events, exhibitions) which were mentioned three times, the other eight integration adaptations identified by coordinators were mentioned just once or twice: staff sharing break times (2), development of an Early Years committee (2), making Early Years a post or part-time post of responsibility (2), reading collaboration (1), sharing of classes (1), sharing of profile information (1), relocation of classroom to facilitate interaction (1), and consultation of external expertise (1). The range of responses to these questions is interesting. On the one hand, there is quite a lot of variation between schools regarding the extent and type of adaptations (e.g., in some schools nothing has been done whereas in others a number of initiatives are in train). On the other hand, the

fact that so many strategies were mentioned by coordinators suggests that there is probably plenty of scope and goodwill for further integration of Early Start at the junior-infant level in all schools, though, clearly very little consideration has been given to integration issues at senior-infant level. Contrary to the general view, one coordinator reported that the proposal had been discussed and abandoned and suggested that a second year of Early Start would be preferable to an integration policy. Overwhelmingly, however, coordinators seemed supportive of Early Start integration and many saw themselves as having a role in its implementation (N=26). While nearly half (N=14) admitted that they were unsure of how they might contribute to these developments, the remainder committed themselves to providing continued support for parents and staff with some mentioning their intention to stay close to Early Start parents and children following progression to junior infants.

### **Conclusion**

In previous evaluations, the interface between Early Start and Home-School-Community-Liaison, both of which are designed to address educational disadvantage in schools, received limited attention. To date, very little was known about how Early Start and Home-School-Community-Liaison co-exist in the 40 primary schools where both are located (e.g., the implications for staff who are directly involved in the initiatives and/or the outcomes for the whole school and its parent community have not been explored to any extent). In an attempt to address some of these issues, the study on which this report is based focussed on the nature and extent of involvement of HSCL coordinators in Early Start, paying particular attention to the coordinators' perceptions of their role. In addition to examining the work undertaken by coordinators in Early Start as part of their overall brief, an important objective of the study was to tap into the collective experiences of coordinators with a view to identifying successful strategies for dealing with issues of enrolment, attendance and parent involvement in schools in disadvantaged areas. Furthermore, relying on the coordinators as key witnesses of parent-teacher interaction, it was hoped to learn something about attitude change among parents and teachers in a climate of increased parent involvement. Finally, some consideration was given to the potential for further collaboration between Early Start and HSCL by providing coordinators with an

opportunity to comment on the planned integration of Early Start in Early Years provision.

Prior to participating in the study, most of the coordinators had opportunities to become familiar with the day-to-day operation of Early Start. On average, they had each worked with two or more Early Start teachers and had more than four years coordinating experience. A high rate of within-school transfer of pupils from Early Start to junior-infant classes suggests that many of the coordinators had been able to observe the progress of Early Start pupils (and that of their families) as they advanced towards the middle grades of primary school.

The main activity undertaken by HSCL coordinators in Early Start during 2004/05 was facilitating parent involvement. This involved mainly organising, but also presenting, information talks for parents at the school. The finding more or less confirms that reported in a previous evaluation (Educational Research Centre, 1998). Most of the information talks were on health, children's education, and parenting and are given mainly by health professionals; others relating to parent induction and parent classroom involvement tended to be delivered by the coordinators (and/or other school personnel). This type of activity was mentioned nearly twice as often as school or community events for children and parents (though, of course, parent involvement is also, by definition, community involvement) and nearly three times as often as staff liaison. Promotional work (e.g., the distribution of educational materials), home visits, facilitating parent-to-parent contact, and spending time with parents informally in the school featured less prominently in coordinators' accounts of their work.

Coordinators tended to approach their responsibilities in Early Start in much the same way from year to year, with plans being occasionally revised in response to a change in school circumstances (e.g., greater diversity in the cultural backgrounds of pupils, staff turnover, or, unusually, an expansion of Early Start). Their work had a cyclical dimension to it that reflected the calendar of the school year. Parents were welcomed when they arrived with their child at the school in September. The initial contact was then used to encourage attendance at information talks in the school and participation in children's events and classroom activities. In the second and third

terms, the coordinator tended to devote more time to home visits. The purpose of the visits was to encourage additional contact, target attendance problems, and stimulate interest in child/adult literacy. Additionally, the coordinator attended to the needs of incoming parents. While most aspects of this job description, construed from the questionnaire data, are reflected in comments submitted by many of the coordinators, it may be noted that the promotion of child and/or adult literacy was not a strong feature of the submissions. Whether this last finding simply reflects the absence of formal reading activities in Early Start classrooms and/or is a question that merits further attention.

Issues of enrolment, attendance, and parent involvement were central to the concerns of HSCL coordinators. In most cases, the coordinator's role in Early Start extended to identifying some of the new participants and to having a say in their subsequent enrolment. The extent of their own involvement in this aspect of Early Start was not an issue for most coordinators; neither did they express much concern about any aspect of school enrolment policies. While showing a good deal of awareness of the difficulties involved in reaching all of the target group, coordinators were largely satisfied that Early Start places were being filled by the most disadvantaged children in the community. This is true even though Early Start pupils were regarded as more disadvantaged than other pupils in the school in less than a quarter of the schools served by the coordinators who took part in the study.

Most coordinators had positive views about the impact of their role on pupil attendance rates which, over the ten-year life span of the intervention, were reported to have improved. Where individual attendance problems presented, the most frequently used strategy to deal with them was a home visit by the coordinator but, in some schools, responsibility for attendance issues was shared by a number of staff. In the feedback obtained in the questionnaire, no specific strategy emerged as being more successful than others as a means of addressing attendance issues. In an in-career development seminar mentioned in the introduction to this report, however, the importance of dealing with parent attendance in conjunction with pupil attendance was underlined. In a school served by one of the coordinators attending the seminar, a place in Early Start was conditional on parent involvement in classroom activities. An improvement in the attendance of both parents and pupils was noted subsequently.

In relation to parent involvement, coordinators readily identified a number of approaches that they would recommend not only to other schools with Early Start but also to teachers of older pupils in their own schools. Of these, learning activities which involve parents working with their child on a one-to-one basis under teacher supervision were the most frequently mentioned. While, in the Early Start context, one specific recommendation related to the provision of brief (no more than 20-minute) periods of parent-child interaction at the beginning and end of sessions, there was a good deal of support for the view that such activity-based approaches were preferable to the presentation of information talks particularly when attendance at such talks is poor. An increase in HSCL input to Early Start and in the amount of time devoted to language development when parents are present was also recommended. For the parents of older pupils, coordinators recommended mainstreaming aspects of Early Start, to involve them in language development, music, art, maths, and shared reading. More generally, coordinators referred to the quality and timing of contact when considering how best to engage with parents. The importance of informal personal contact early in the school year was recognised, and induction meetings in the year prior to entry were also favoured. For the most marginalised pupils in both Early Start and the rest of the school, coordinators recommended more contact with parents in the school yard and in home visits.

The amount of time devoted to Early Start by coordinators increased between 2003/04 and 2004/05 for a variety of reasons, not least of which was their increased awareness, developed during recent in-career development, of the potential impact of early intervention. While Early Start pupils accounted for a very small proportion of pupils in a primary school, it is interesting that coordinators generally regarded themselves as being more involved with the parents of Early Start pupils than with the parents of older children in the school. The age profile of the children (rather than their level of disadvantage) was identified as the main factor in contributing to parents' need for and openness to involvement, though the emphasis in Early Start on parent involvement was also acknowledged. Of course, the coordinators may themselves be encouraging greater contact with Early Start parents simply by being present outside classrooms at delivery and collection times. This practice, which probably helps to build the informal relations with parents that engender trust and confidence, was not reported as a feature of their work with older pupils.

By and large, coordinators seemed satisfied with the network of parent and school relationships that attaches to the role of coordinator in Early Start. Problems that were mentioned in a few cases have, in fact, little to do with Early Start and were largely attributed to a reluctance by other staff members to fully endorse home-school-community liaison rather than to poor relations with parents. Neither did any of the difficulties encountered involve Early Start teachers, who were reported to be a good deal more proactive than both parents and school principals in engaging the services of the coordinators in relation to Early Start. Overall, it should be noted that coordinators were enthusiastic about their involvement both with Early Start parents and with Early Start teachers who they regarded as being ‘tuned into parents’.

As observers of parent-teacher interaction, coordinators had mixed views about the attitudes of parents to teachers in the context of increased parent involvement. The main difficulty they identified had to do with the non-engagement of some parents. For those parents who were willing to be involved, however, the barriers had broken down and a genuine partnership existed between parents and teachers, according to coordinators. The attitudes of parents towards their children’s education had also changed for the better though, again, not all some parents were perceived to have become more interested in the activities of the school. In any case, coordinators seemed uncertain about long-term outcomes. While parents who got involved were perceived to have learned about the importance of play, gained an appreciation of language development, and become aware of their own role as educators, several coordinators expressed doubts about the extent to which parents, even those who were committed at the outset, would be able to sustain their interest in their child’s progress at school beyond the early years. Levels of deprivation and the absence of appropriate supports were identified as the main barriers to sustained parent involvement.

Notwithstanding their concerns about the longer-term interest of parents in their children’s education, the experiences of coordinators suggest that Early Start resulted in increased parent involvement in subsequent years. Most coordinators agreed that this was happening in their schools and that it might be reflected in different ways (e.g., in goodwill for the work of the school and school policies, in well-attended parent-teacher meetings, in a willingness to present at the school to



discuss a problem and even in participation in school administration). As a result of the time and opportunity for parent involvement that Early Start permitted, it was not unusual for a core group of parent supporters, formed during their Early Start experiences, to remain involved as their children progressed or for parents who engaged with their children in the classroom to sustain their involvement.

It was the view of coordinators that involvement with parents could be demanding on Early Start teachers. While teachers might be more informed about disadvantage and have greater understanding of a child's home background, they were also more aware of the difficulties experienced by parents and sometimes disheartened as a result. From a child's perspective, however, the increased awareness of the teacher of family circumstances was regarded by coordinators as an advantage. It tended to result in teachers treating children with more tolerance and in educational programmes that were more tailored to the needs of individual children.

Compared to the findings of previous evaluations, coordinators seemed clearer about Early Start and its relevance to the home-school-community liaison scheme in the wider community (e.g., they no longer looked for explanations about their role or referred to their need for information about the objectives of Early Start to share with community workers and agencies). In feedback about their work, coordinators referred to the impact of recent in-career development, in which the role of coordinators in Early Start was clarified to school principals, as a positive influence that subsequently paid dividends. They also regarded their history of involvement with Early Start parents as beneficial to their activities and came to appreciate that Early Start helped them to establish good relations with parents when parents are most receptive to involvement. In particular, the opportunity to identify disadvantage and to intervene appropriately at an early stage of the educational experiences of a child was recognised by coordinators as an important advantage of Early Start that also facilitated and enhanced their role in the school more generally.

A number of challenges remain. There is the on-going effort to reach all parents in the target group and to provide a service which can cater for parents with wide-ranging characteristics. In addition to those who are described as very marginalised and who have difficulty in coping with addictions of one kind or

another, coordinators may have to deal with parents who have little or no English, or who are immature and have had bad experiences of school, and/or others who are simply not at home very much. Coordinators themselves are aware of the need for more informal contact with parents in the school yard and in home visits. In addition to Early Start teachers, there may be scope for teachers of older pupils in the school to also ‘tune in’ more to parents to support the work of the coordinator and Early Start personnel. There is a danger that the appointment of a home-school-community-liaison coordinator could be seen by other teachers to absolve or exclude them from developing contacts with parents. There is clearly an awareness of this danger among coordinators, reinforced by the National Coordinator (there are references in HSCL documentation to every teachers being a HSCL teacher). This is perhaps reflected in the fact that the need for more whole-school engagement in dealing with disadvantage, in ways that support and reinforce the HSCL scheme, is suggested by the feedback from coordinators.

Perhaps the single most important challenge facing coordinators relates to issues of time management. It is clear from the descriptions of their role that coordinators have to prioritise between families, between teachers, and between schools in some cases. On-going opportunities to talk about the competing demands on their time and to share their experiences with other coordinators, teachers, and school principals seem to be particularly helpful in the context of in-career development and the various networks and clusters to which coordinators belong. The reports of their experiences indicate that coordinators seem to have availed of recent in-career days to successfully highlight and resolve some of their concerns.

There are several aspects to the role of coordinator, a number of which were not mentioned by coordinators who participated in the study. These include fundraising activities, promotion of inclusive policy-making procedures in the school, and management of the ‘local committee’. Even so, many coordinators identified work with parents as their main future priority. Apparently aware of the need to devote more of their time to the promotion of adult and child literacy, the most frequently identified priority by coordinators was the development of parents as educators in language development, reading, and maths. Though clear about their objectives in this regard, there are some indications that coordinators are less clear

about their role in achieving them. Among the questions to be addressed are: What is the balance between facilitation and delivery of a family literacy service vis-à-vis the role of the coordinator? If, as seems likely, the coordinators are to be engaged in a mainly facilitating role in family literacy interventions and not to be directly involved in delivery (i.e., in a teaching/tutoring capacity), who will provide the service and how can it be delivered in ways that complement the role of the coordinators?

Other challenges that will increasingly demand the attention of coordinators involve work with parents of different nationalities and backgrounds including travellers and the development of an Early Years programme. The latter is already in train in some schools with beginning signs of progress reflected in greater collaboration between junior-infant and Early Start teachers and in some curricular change for junior infants. Though not yet entirely clear about their role in these developments, HSCL coordinators pledged their continuing support for the teachers, pupils, and parents involved. In their willingness to respond to all, or even some, of the needs in their schools, it is inevitable that they will continue to be challenged to manage their time wisely.

## REFERENCES

- Archer, P. & Shortt, F. (2003). Review of the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
- Archer, P., & Weir, S. (2005). Addressing disadvantage. A review of the international literature and of strategy in Ireland. Report to the Educational Disadvantage Committee. Dublin: Educational Disadvantage Committee/ Department of Education and Science.
- Department of Education and Science. (2005). DEIS (Delivering equality of opportunity in schools). An action plan for educational inclusion. Dublin: Author.
- Educational Research Centre. (1998). Early Start preschool programme: Final evaluation report. Dublin: Author.
- Kellaghan, T., Weir, S., Ó hÚllacháin, S., & Morgan, M. (1995). Educational disadvantage in Ireland. Dublin: Department of Education/Combat Poverty Agency/Educational Research Centre.
- Kelly, D. & Kellaghan, T. (1999). The literacy and numeracy achievements of the first cohort of Early Start children (1994/95) when they were in second class. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
- Lewis, M. & Archer, P. (2002). Further evaluation of Early Start. Progress report. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
- Lewis, M. & Archer, P. (2005). Observation methodology in preschool programme evaluation: The Early Start experience. In H. Schonfeld, S. O'Brien & T. Walsh (Eds.), Questions of quality. Proceedings of a conference on defining, assessing and supporting quality in early childhood care and education (pp. 214-224). Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.
- Ryan, S. (1994). The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme. Final evaluation report. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.
- Ryan, S. (1999). The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme. Summary evaluation report (revised). Dublin: Educational Research Centre.