A STUDY OF PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN GAELSCOILEANNA

Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig
Scoil na gCeithre Máistrí
Ath Luain

In the study described in this paper the extent to which differences exist between parents in gaelscoileanna and parents in mainstream primary schools in their valuation and perception of parental involvement was investigated. The study was based on a national sample of primary schools in which information was obtained on attitudes and perceptions towards parental involvement in three areas (provision of information, parental access, and parental involvement in policy formation). The main difference between parents of children attending gaelscoileanna and parents of children attending mainstream primary schools were found to be in their perceptions of their levels of involvement in matters of school organization and management. Differences between these two cohorts of parents were not evident when child-based or class/teacher-based issues were examined.

Gaelscoileanna or all-Irish Primary schools are defined as 'ordinary national schools under the Department of Education and Science where every subject is taught through Irish and Irish is the medium of instruction' (Gaelscoileanna, 1991). However, apart from the medium of instruction, there is another facet of gaelscoileanna that differentiates them from other mainstream primary schools, and that is the fact that they were all established by parents, sometimes with the help of other groups, who were interested in the provision of all-Irish primary education in their locality. Thus, existence of a gaelscoil implies that, at some time, a significant group of parents were proactive in the pursuit of a form of education for their children that differed from existing provision.

What effect does this level of parental involvement have on the operation of gaelscoileanna? More specifically, is parental involvement in their establishment associated with continuing greater levels of involvement once schools are established? In the study described in this paper, which is part of a larger study of parental involvement in primary education (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2002), the values and perceptions of parents in gaelscoileanna and in non-gaelscoileanna (referred to as mainstream primary schools) are compared in relation to the provision of information to parents, parental access to schools, and parental involvement in school policy formation. Parents of pupils in senior infants and fifth classes were selected for study on the assumption that

interaction between parents and teachers at the infant level differs from interaction between teachers and parents at the senior level of primary school.

METHOD

Instrument

The questionnaire administered to parents sought information on the following topics.

Provision of information. Respondents (parents) were asked in a questionnaire to detail the importance they attached to schools providing information to parents on issues relating to their child (child's behaviour, educational development, social development, and test results) and school (information received prior to enrolment, the school curriculum, school procedures and policies, routine activities and affairs of the board of management). Degree of importance attached to information was indicated by circling a number from 1 to 5 (1 = no importance; 5 = great importance). In a follow-up question, respondents were asked to indicate their perception of the amount of information that parents received relating to each item, using one of four options: none, some but not sufficient, sufficient, and more than sufficient.

Parental Access. Respondents were asked to indicate the freedom of access that they felt parents should enjoy to the class teacher, school principal, their child's school work, and their child's school record. They were provided with five options: at any time, by appointment except in emergencies, by appointment only, at formal meetings only, and never. Respondents were asked how frequently they felt that parents in their school could speak to the class teacher and principal regarding their child's behaviour, educational development, and social development, how frequently they felt parents could see their child's school work and record, and how often they could speak about school policies to the class teacher, the school principal, members of the board of management, and members of the parents' association. Three response options were provided: as often as necessary, at formal meetings only/sometimes, and never.

Parental Involvement in Policy Formation. On an item relating to five topics (general school policies, information brochures, codes of discipline, formal curriculum, and special programmes), respondents were asked to identify what level of involvement they felt should be open to parents. Five options were provided: not involved, kept informed by the school, consulted by the school, involved under the direction of teachers, and involved as partners with teachers. Finally, respondents were asked to identify the nature of parental involvement in policy formation in their school. Five options were provided: 'I don't know if the school has one'; 'The school has one but I have never seen it', 'Parents receive a

final copy', 'Parents receive a copy and are invited to comment', 'Parents are involved in writing'.

Respondents

Schools were first selected; then parents of children attending the schools.

The total population of primary schools on the Department of Education and Science database for 1999/2000 (N=3,172) was categorized by size (small, medium, large) and whether a school had disadvantage status, had not disadvantage status, or was a gaelscoil (Table 1) (see Cohen & Mannion, 1980).

Small schools are schools with 1 to 3 mainstream class teachers, medium schools have 4 to 6 mainstream class teachers, and large schools have 7 or more mainstream class teachers. Schools described as having disadvantage status were participating in a Department of Education and Science Scheme of Assistance to schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage. Schools qualified for the scheme on the basis of criteria relating to the socioeconomic background of their pupils and received additional resources. Gaelscoileanna are recognized by the Department of Education and Science as schools in which the medium of instruction is Irish.

Table 1

Population of Schools and Pupils and Numbers of Schools and Parents in Sample, by Size and Disadvantage Status

| | Population | | Sample | |
	Schools	Pupils	Number of Schools	Number of Parents
Small:				
Disadvantaged	72	5,756	4	53
Non-disadvantaged	1,816	108,074	12	104
Gaelscoileanna	33	1,933	4	51
Medium:				
Disadvantaged	67	10,072	4	88
Non-disadvantaged	373	52,820	6	89
Gaelscoileanna	14	1,698	4	81
Large:				
Disadvantaged	171	48,547	4	91
Non-disadvantaged	563	183,741	4	118
Gaelscoileanna	63	15,691	2	59
Total	3,172	428,332	44	734

Within cells, schools were selected using a random start, fixed-interval procedure. In general, the percentage of parents selected in each cell was proportionate to the percentage of the total population of pupils in the cell.

However, some modification of this principle was required in the case of certain cells, gaelscoileanna and small disadvantaged schools in particular, to ensure a sufficient number of returns for analysis. The effect of increasing the number of respondents in certain cells was counterbalanced by a process of weighting to reflect population statistics.

A set of replacement schools (n=27) was selected to be used if schools were unwilling to participate in the study. One replacement school was used.

Parents of all children in senior infants and fifth class in alternate schools in each cell were selected. Thus, as there are 12 schools in the small non-disadvantaged schools cell (Table 1), parents of all children in senior infants received the questionnaire in six schools and parents of all children in fifth class received the questionnaire in a further six schools.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed through schools. Initial contact was made with the school principal by phone and the nature of the research was explained. This was followed by posting on a copy of the questionnaire, covering letters, and reminders, as well as a brief description of the study. A further phone call was made three days after the anticipated receipt of the questionnaire to secure the principal's agreement to distribute questionnaires to parents. Once this was secured, a date was agreed on which the questionnaires could be distributed and they were then mailed to the principal.

Parents who received the questionnaire were asked to return it when completed directly to the researcher in a stamped return envelope. Following a two-week time period, two further letters were sent to each principal for distribution to parents. A total of 321 questionnaire (43.7% of the questionnaires distributed) were returned. The response of parents of children attending gaelscoileanna (51.8%) was higher than the response of parents of children attending mainstream primary schools (40.9%).

RESULTS

Independent t-tests were used to test for significant differences between the mean scores on questionnaire items of parents of children in gaelscoileanna and of parents of children in mainstream primary schools. As the sample design effect was not taken into account in the calculation of statistics, and a series of t-tests was used rather than multivariate analysis, a *p* value of .01 was set as an indicator of statistical significance as a safeguard against type II errors. Data from questionnaires were analysed using the SPSS (8.0 for Windows) statistical program.

Provision of Information to Parents

Parents of children in mainstream primary schools did not differ significantly from parents of children in gaelscoileanna in the importance they attached to receiving information from schools (Table 2).

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for the Responses of Mainstream Parents and Gaelscoil Parents to Items Regarding the Importance of Receiving Information from Schools

Importance of receiving information from schools on:	Mainstream (N=22)		Gaelscoil (N=99)			
	M	SD	M	SD	*t*	*p*
Child-based:						
Behaviour	4.9	.39	4.9	.37	.514	.608
Educational development	4.8	.50	4.8	.44	.802	.423
Social development	4.7	.60	4.8	.50	.778	.437
Test results	4.8	.52	4.7	.59	.752	.453
School-based:						
Curriculum	4.6	.68	4.6	.64	.171	.865
Procedures and policies	4.7	.62	4.7	.57	.402	.688
Routine activities	4.5	.76	4.5	.72	.044	.965
Enrolment brochure	4.5	.75	4.6	.76	.897	.370
Affairs of the board of management	4.1	.96	4.1	.89	.344	.731

Based on a 5-point scale ranging from 5, very important, to 1 not important. Equal variance is not assumed.

When responses for individual items relating to the amount of information that parents received are considered, the clear indication is that the critical differences between parents of pupils in the two types of school relate to satisfaction with information on organizational and administrative matters (enrolment brochures, procedures and policies, routine activities, and affairs of the board of management) rather than with information on child and learning-related matters (Table 3). It is important to note that this difference in perception does not extend to the school curriculum, where unique among all school-related items, the difference between the cohorts is not statistically significant.

Parental Access

Differences between the perceptions of mainstream parents and those of gaelscoil parents in relation to the freedom of access that they feel parents should

enjoy to the class teacher, school principal, their child's school work, or their child's school record are not statistically significant (Table 4).

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for the Responses of Mainstream Parents and Gaelscoil Parents to Items Regarding the Perception of the Adequacy of Information Received from Schools

	Mainstream (N=22)		Gaelscoil (N=99)			
Information received:	M	SD	M	SD	*t*	*p*
Child-based:						
Behaviour	2.9	.62	3.0	.66	.721	.471
Educational development	2.9	.64	3.0	.64	1.934	.054
Social development	2.8	.73	2.9	.71	1.225	.225
Test results	2.9	.73	3.1	.71	2.033	.043
School-based:						
Curriculum	2.6	.84	2.8	.87	1.948	.052
Procedures and policies	2.8	.75	3.1	.66	3.599	.000
Routine activities	2.9	.66	3.3	.63	4.151	.000
Enrolment brochure	2.3	1.05	2.8	.96	4.086	.000
Affairs of the board of management	2.4	.92	2.7	.82	3.439	.001

Based on a 4-point scale ranging from 4, more than sufficient, to 1, none. Equal variance is not assumed.

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations for the Responses of Parents in Mainstream Schools and Parents in Gaelscoileanna to Items Regarding Perception of Parental Access

	Mainstream (N=22)		Gaelscoil (N=99)			
Freedom of access to:	M	SD	M	SD	*t*	*p*
Class teacher	4.3	.67	4.3	.48	.254	.800
School principal	4.1	.73	4.0	.57	1.225	.222
Child's school work	4.1	1.1	4.1	1.1	.042	.967
Child's school record	3.9	1.1	3.8	1.1	.702	.483

Based on a 5-point scale ranging from 5, at any time, to 1, never.

Significant differences between the perceptions of parents in mainstream primary schools and gaelscoileanna in relation to access to school personnel were found only for items relating to freedom of access to the school principal, the board of management, and parents' association (Table 5). For items relating to access to the class teacher to discuss all child-related issues and to see the

child's schoolwork and record, the mean scores of both sets of parents were remarkably similar.

In the case of perceptions of access to the school principal to discuss child-related issues, gaelscoil parents recorded a significantly higher mean score than mainstream parents (Table 5). The data also suggest that gaelscoil parents perceived a level of access to the school principal that was similar to that perceived for access to the class teacher by both gaelscoil and mainstream parents.

When it came to discussing school policy issues, gaelscoil parents perceived a higher level of access to teachers, principals, boards of management, and parents' associations (Table 5). While gaelscoil parents made a slight distinction between their perceptions of access to the principal and to the teacher, in favour of the principal, mainstream parents made no such distinction.

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations for the Responses of Mainstream Parents and Gaelscoil Parents to Items Regarding Perception of Level of Parental Access

Perception of access to:	Mainstream (N=22)		Gaelscoil (N=99)			
	M	SD	M	SD	*t*	*p*
The class teacher about my child's						
behaviour	2.9	.37	2.9	.27	1.944	.053
educational development	2.8	.42	2.8	.37	1.550	.123
social development	2.8	.45	2.8	.34	.914	.361
The school principal about my child's						
behaviour	2.6	.61	2.8	.40	4.098	.000
educational development	2.6	.61	2.8	.43	4.053	.000
social development	2.6	.63	2.8	.40	4.574	.000
See my child's						
school work	2.7	.50	2.7	.44	1.190	.236
school record	2.6	.60	2.7	.51	2.184	.030
Speak about school policies to						
my child's class teacher	2.3	.68	.25	.63	1.745	.082
the school principal	2.3	.67	2.6	.55	4.158	.000
members of the board of management	1.8	.78	2.0	.74	2.250	.009
members of the parents' association	2.0	.77	2.2	.68	2.633	.006

Based on a 3-point scale ranging from 3, as often as necessary, to 1, never. Equal variance is not assumed.

Parental Involvement in Policy Formation

Parents in gaelscoileanna placed a higher value on parental involvement in school policy formation than parents in mainstream primary schools (Table 6).

However, despite the fact that gaelscoil parents recorded a higher mean score for three of the five areas, none of the differences is statistically significant at the .01 level, and all point to differences in emphasis rather than substantial differences of approach.

Table 6
Means and Standard Deviations for the Responses of Mainstream Parents and Gaelscoil Parents to Items Regarding Parental Involvement in School Policy Formation

	Mainstream (N=22)		Gaelscoil (N=99)			
Parental involvement in:	M	SD	M	SD	t	p
General school policies:						
Code of discipline	2.9	1.20	3.2	1.27	1.717	.087
Special programmes	2.9	1.21	3.3	1.23	2.233	.026
School policies	2.7	1.12	3.1	1.32	2.118	.036
Information brochures	2.6	1.12	3.0	1.33	2.275	.024
Academic affairs						
Formal curriculum	2.4	1.06	2.5	1.04	.614	.540

Based on a 5-point scale ranging from 5, involved as partners with teachers, to 1, not involved.

Table 7
Means and Standard Deviations for the Responses of Mainstream Parents and Gaelscoil Parents to Items Dealing with Perceptions of Parental Involvement in School Policy Formation

	Mainstream (N=22)		Gaelscoil (N=99)			
Perceptions	M	SD	M	SD	t	p
General School Policies:						
Code of discipline	2.4	.95	2.9	.92	3.390	.000
Special programmes	2.2	1.07	2.6	1.11	2.700	.007
School policies	1.9	.92	2.6	1.01	5.302	.000
Information brochures	1.8	.87	2.3	1.22	3.390	.000
Academic affairs						
Formal curriculum	1.8	.82	2.1	.94	2.813	.004

Based on a 5-point scale ranging from 5, parents are involved in writing it, to 1, the school doesn't have one.

Significant differences were found for the perceptions of parents in mainstream schools and gaelscoileanna on all items relating to current levels of parental involvement in their schools (Table 7). Both sets of parents indicated

that while they knew the school had information brochures and a formal curriculum, they had never seen them. In the case of general school policies and special programmes, mainstream parents indicated that they had never seen them, while gaelscoil parents indicated that they had received copies of relevant documents. There was a general consensus among gaelscoil parents that they had received copies of the code of discipline, while mainstream parents varied between never having seen the code to having received a copy.

CONCLUSION

The study described in this paper found a number of significant differences between the perceptions of parents of children in gaelscoileanna and parents of children in mainstream primary schools. The former received more information on school-based topics, and enjoyed a significantly greater level of access to the school principal and to their child's school record. The overall impression is that while parents in both types of school attached the same level of importance to information provision to parents, parents in gaelscoileanna perceived that they received more information than their counterparts in mainstream primary schools. Gaelscoil parents also perceived greater freedom of access to discuss school policy issues with the principal and with representatives of the board of management and parents' association, and a greater level of involvement in school policy formation. While both sets of parents had similar perceptions of parental access, differences do exist in their perceptions of current levels of access enjoyed by parents, with gaelscoil parents enjoying a higher level of parental access than their mainstream counterparts. However, differences relate exclusively to the perceptions of parents regarding interactions of a school-based nature rather than to child-focused interactions. They are also chiefly concerned with interactions with the school principal and/or boards of management, not with the class teacher. Finally, differences exist mainly in the area of perceptions, not in the area of values.

The differences revealed in the study may be indicative of a difference in processes at work in the two types of school. It may be that the involvement of parents in the establishment of gaelscoileanna makes partnerships on issues of general school matters more explicit than in mainstream primary schools. The differences may also be partly due to the fact that most gaelscoileanna are relatively new, and thus may be in an establishment phase rather than a more maintenance-oriented phase, as would be the case in most mainstream primary schools. Whatever the explanation, it may be that gaelscoileanna could provide a fertile starting place for initiatives to broaden parental involvement in general school matters.

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