

TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP: THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN IRISH PRIMARY EDUCATION SINCE 1970

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Policies and initiatives designed to promote parental involvement in Irish primary education since 1970 are described at two levels: those that were targeted at the entire education system and those directed at dealing with educational disadvantage or social exclusion. System-wide initiatives considered are the 1971 curriculum, the establishment of boards of management, the multi-denominational and gaelscoil movements, Circular 24/91, the Report on the Review of Primary Education, the Education Act, the Education Welfare Act, and the Revised Curriculum. Strategies that focused on educational disadvantage are the Rutland Street Project, the Disadvantage Area Scheme, the Home School Community Liaison Programme, Early Start, Breaking the Cycle, Giving Children an Even Break and the DEIS initiatives. The paper considers how the understanding of partnership evolved and identifies the particular model of partnership embraced by specific initiatives.

Since at least the 1960s there is a large degree of consensus among educational researchers that children's academic achievement and general development are beneficially influenced by the extent to which their parents are involved in their education (Douglas, 1964; Greaney, 1988; Kellaghan, 1977a; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez & Bloom, 1993; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). At whole-school level, there is further general agreement that a positive association exists between student achievement and the degree to which parents are involved in the work of the school (Archer & Weir, 2004). While the benign effect of individual parental involvement programmes has been questioned (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Vincent, 1996; Vincent & Martin, 2000), educational policy makers have nevertheless long stressed the importance of initiatives to promote the involvement of parents in their children's learning and in their children's schools.

Programmes to promote parental involvement are both diverse and multi-faceted and commentators have offered various typologies to describe the different kinds of involvement. Fullan (1991) identifies four kinds: involvement at school level; involvement in learning activities; relationship between home, school and community; and governance. Epstein (1996) offers a framework of six major kinds of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating. Hanafin and Lynch (2002) identify 'two distinct strands with two distinct rationales.' One is directed at all parents and focuses on system-based issues such as school management, parent representative bodies, and curriculum. The second strand seeks to target educational disadvantage and promote social inclusion by targeting children from disadvantaged communities and seeking to involve parents who are perceived to be marginalized from the education system. This two-strand framework is adopted in this paper to describe the development of parental involvement in Irish primary education since 1970.

DEVELOPMENTS AT SYSTEM-LEVEL

The beginnings of the 1970s saw a broadening of power structures in society as governments throughout the world began to implement various schemes to increase citizen participation in decision-making. With a focus on the idea that democracy should be extended, these changes were characterized by the transfer of various aspects of the decision-making structures to involve interested partners (Beattie, 1985). In Ireland, Cluskey (1996) detected a climate of optimism and expectation from the prevailing culture as individuals began to expect and demand an opportunity to participate in decision-making. Civil rights became a focus for political activity both internationally and nationally. The Women's Rights Movement, which was part of a growing civil rights movement, challenged the traditional power bases in Irish society. These societal changes, combined with an ever-increasing politicization of education, resulted in issues of concern to parents being quickly seized on and used as a source of electoral support (Bastiani, 1988).

The 1971 Curriculum

While the planning stages of the 1971 curriculum excluded both parents and the wider public and offered only a very limited role to teachers, its introduction was very much welcomed by all concerned. Teachers, in

particular, welcomed its child-centred character and the freedom that it allowed in teaching techniques (Walsh, 1996). While curriculum handbooks for teachers failed to mention a role for parents in education, references were made to children's education taking place in a 'meaningful and relevant context' (Department of Education, 1971, p.19), and the emphasis on environment-focused learning immediately made primary education more accessible to them and to the wider community. Furthermore, the mechanism for the implementation of the curriculum made certain gestures towards parental involvement. A booklet, *All Our Children*, issued to parents in 1969, outlined the impending changes in Irish education, and charged the principal teacher with fostering a proper liaison between home and school (Department of Education, 1969). However, sufficient resources were never provided to follow up the many worthwhile suggestions contained in this publication (INTO, 1997; Walsh, 1996).

The Establishment of Boards of Management

Prior to 1975, management of primary schools was vested exclusively in the manager who was invariably a priest or rector and was directly appointed by the school's patron¹. With the establishment of boards of management for primary schools in 1975, initial steps were taken to share some of the managerial power and responsibilities with others, notably parents and teachers. The final agreed membership of boards for schools of six or more teachers was: four nominees of the patron, the school principal, one elected teacher, and two elected parents (one male, one female). In schools of less than six teachers, the patron would have three nominees and there would be no elected teacher. The composition of boards was revised in 1997 to provide

¹ The patron of a school is a representative of the owner and can be an individual or a group. Historically, church authorities acted as patrons of primary schools by initiating the process of establishing a new school when one was needed to serve a specific geographic area. Currently Catholic and Church of Ireland bishops are the patrons of schools within their dioceses which are owned by the religious denominations. The multi-denominational schools' patron is usually the board of trustees or the limited company Educate Together. Gaelscoileanna may be under the patronage of the bishop, the limited company Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán Ghaeilge or, in the case of multi-denominational Gaelscoileanna, Educate Together. Since 2008, County Dublin Vocational Education Committee acts as patron for a newly established school in Dublin.

for equal representation of patron, teachers, parents, and community². The National Parents Council–Primary (NPC–P) played a significant role against strong opposition from representatives of church patrons in acquiring equal representation on boards for parents (Walshe, 1999).

Boards have been both welcomed and criticized by parents and their representatives (Walsh, 1996). On the positive side, structures were put in place which facilitated parents becoming involved in a decision-making process directly related to the education of their children. The areas of school life open to discussion by the board are all-embracing in that boards are responsible for the appointment of assistant teachers, for the delegation of duties to the school principal and for devising school policy along with other administrative functions (Catholic Primary School Managers' Association, 2004). On the negative side, it is claimed that parent representatives were often socialized into loyalty to the board and, as a result, were reluctant to challenge professional control of the decision-making process (Murphy, 1991; O'Brien, 1991). Murphy also detected resistance to providing adequate training to parent representatives which put many of them at an immediate disadvantage in exercising their management functions. Lack of training and power inequalities on boards also contributed to a restriction of the real power of boards. Conaty (2002), for example, noted that issues such as curriculum planning and implementation and matters concerning teaching and learning were rarely discussed at board level.

The Multi-Denominational and Gaelscoil Movements

The growth of multi-denominational and gaelscoil movements occurred in the early 1970s. Both movements were indicators, firstly, of an appreciation of the central role that parents could play in education and, secondly, of the difficulty that parents could experience in playing that role. However, what is most notable about both phenomena is the fact that they arose directly from parental wishes and, in effect, challenged the traditional church/state dominance of educational management.

²The new revised structure provides that in all schools, with the exception of one-teacher schools, the patron has two nominees, parents have two elected representatives, teachers have two representatives (the principal and one elected teacher), and members of the wider community have two nominees, unanimously selected by the initial six. One-teacher schools have one nominee of the patron, the principal, an elected parent, and one member of the wider community.

The multi-denominational movement originated among parents of children attending the local Church of Ireland school in Dalkey in south county Dublin. This school had grown from one teacher to five, and its pupil profile reflected Church of Ireland, other Protestant denominations, and Catholic pupils in roughly equal proportions. Because of the changing profile of pupils, parents wished the school to be officially recognized as multi-denominational. The resistance they experienced from both church and state was indicative both of the dominance exercised by these two powerful partners in educational management and of their conservative approach to educational change (Hyland, 1989). The churches were concerned that multi-denominational education might be part of a wider trend towards secularization, while the state had difficulty in accepting that a multi-denominational education could be accorded the same recognition by the state as denominational education (Coolahan, 1981).

When the request to recognize the changing face of their local school was refused, the parents set up the Dalkey school project in 1975 with the aim of pressing for the establishment of a primary school that would be multi-denominational, co-educational, and under a democratic management structure. Despite the numerous financial and legal obstacles placed in their way, the parents eventually realized their ambition and the first school of the multi-denominational movement opened in Dun Laoghaire in 1978 (Hyland, 1989). Since then, multi-denominational education has grown to the extent that by 2009 there are 56 such schools³ which altogether educated 9,727 pupils⁴. The movement also has an umbrella group, Educate Together, to provide support for the schools and to represent their interests at national level.

Gaelscoileanna, the Irish language medium education movement, had their origin among parents who wished to have their children educated through the medium of Irish and saw the need to establish schools to help them achieve this. While this group experienced resistance, particularly from existing schools fearful of losing pupil numbers (Ní Chuinneagáin, 1992), the number of gaelscoileanna grew from 11 primary schools in 1972 to 139 primary and 38 post-primary, catering for 25,033 and 6,220 pupils respectively, in 2009⁵. They are represented by an umbrella group, Gaelscoileanna, which promotes their interests.

³ Source: Educate Together

⁴ Source: Department of Education and Science – Statistics Section.

⁵ Source: Gaelscoileanna

Both the multi-denominational and gaelscoil movements are based on the central principle that parents have a right to determine the nature of the education that their children receive, and that it is parents, and not church or state, that should formulate the guiding philosophies of schools (Ní Chuinneagáin, 1992; Walsh, 1996). Both movements safeguard the roles and rights of parents, and parental involvement is institutionalized in a much more extensive and formal way than in most national schools (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003).

The National Parents' Council

The formation of the National Parents' Council-Primary (NPC-P) in 1985 was the direct result of a mounting awareness of the crucial role that parents play in education that occurred in Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s. By the beginning of the 1970s, a number of parent associations in individual schools existed around the country and several national parents' associations had been established, including the National Association for Parents' Associations, The Association for Democracy in Education, and Na Teaghlaigh Ghaelacha. Parent-teacher associations of schools under Protestant control established the Federation of Parents' Associations which campaigned for the establishment of Protestant comprehensive schools and also called for greater involvement by parents in the management of national schools. However, the most notable, and successful, of these associations was the Parent School Movement, which attempted to create a number of debates on education and on the role of parents during the early 1970s (Cluskey, 1996).

The immediate impetus to establish the NPC-P came with the formation of boards of management. Once this occurred, parent leaders were elected at the level of each school, and it soon became apparent that they could gain much from sharing their common concerns. The coming together of these parent groups led to the formation of the Council for Parents Elected Representatives, which was the NPC-P's immediate predecessor (Walsh, 1996).

This development, reflecting the political climate of the time, found further support when Gemma Hussey as Education minister expressed the political objective of 'widening of involvement in the formation of education policy making' (cited in Walsh, 1996, p. 81). She saw the establishment of a national council for parents as a logical step in the fulfilment of this agenda. Consequently, the *Programme for Government 1982-1987* contained a commitment to establish a national parents' council through which parents' views on policy matters could be expressed. On assuming office, Hussey

instructed the schools' inspectorate to become actively involved in the development of a representative body for parents in schools. This involved visiting schools to promote this concept. A 'seeding grant' of £50,000 was provided to assist in the establishment of the National Parents' Council under the Programme for Economic and Social Progress (Cluskey, 1996). The organization founded as a result of this initiative in reality operates as two organizations, the National Parents' Council-Primary (NPC-P), and the National Parents' Council-Post-Primary (NPC-PP).

The establishment of the NPC-P was widely welcomed by public opinion (INTO, 1997). It provided parents with a formal structure that they could utilize to access information and was dedicated to representing their views. Since its formation, it has had a significant impact at national policy level. It participated in the National Education Convention in October 1993⁶. It is represented on virtually all policy committees of the Department of Education and Science and is also invited to make submissions on all bills and initiatives under consideration by the Department. Its overall involvement with, and influence on, the education system have been such that the OECD (1997) claimed that its establishment 'has probably been the most important development so far in recognising the legitimate role of Irish parents in the educational process' (p. 146).

Report of the Review of the Primary Education System 1990

The report of a review of the primary education system published in 1990 devoted a chapter to parents entitled 'Parents as Partners in Education' and stated that a policy for parental partnership in education should be approached from two main viewpoints (Primary Education Review Body, 1990). Firstly, parents should not be seen merely as consumers who demand a service but rather as interested partners in the education process. Secondly, parents should be consulted, as other interested partners are, and should have a significant influence on national educational policy and its local implementation. Based on these twin premises, the report recommended the establishment of home-school links when children are accepted for enrolment and their subsequent strengthening. It also recommended that every school should have a clearly defined policy and programme for productive parental

⁶ A convention organized by the then Minister of Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, as part of the consultation process between the publication of green (June 1992) and white (1995) papers on education. Representatives of 42 organizations participated.

involvement. It further suggested, subject to safeguarding the professional autonomy of the teacher, that schools should involve parents in support roles within the classroom. In support of the view that parents have a right to know what goes on in the schools their children attend, it called for a free flow of information between teachers and parents. The whole tenor of the review was that parents exercise a dominant influence on children's educational experiences and enjoy a constitutional right to play a major role in Irish education. While it acknowledged that this was not always appreciated, it called for a positive commitment from all involved in primary education to enhance parental involvement at national policy level and at the level of individual schools.

Circular 24/91

Circular 24/91, titled 'Parents as Partners in Education' and issued to all schools in 1991, was designed to advise principals and chairpersons of the Department's policy in relation to parental involvement in primary education (Department of Education, 1991). It stated that 'partnership for parents in education is a policy aim of the government' and that the promotion of parental involvement in the education of their children was an 'essential strategy of educational policy and practice.' In pursuit of this aim, the Department of Education required school authorities to provide parents with as much information as possible on all aspects of their children's education, to establish an active parents' association, and to formulate a policy for parental involvement.

Education Act 1998

A partnership approach was also enshrined in the Education Act (1998). Indeed, questions regarding the role of parents in the education system were among the factors that led to the drafting of the act. In its preamble, the act pledges that the education system will be conducted 'in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff and the state' (p. 5). It indicates that a function of the inspectorate will be to 'advise parents and parents' associations' [Section 13 3 (iv) p. 17] and, in general, refers to parents as partners within the education system who are 'responsible for the creation, together with the board...and the teachers, of a school environment which is supportive of learning' [Section 23 (2) (c)]. The act affords parents the opportunity to appeal against a decision of a teacher or other member of staff of a school [Section 28 (1) and (2)]. It also affords

them the right to receive copies of any reports on the operation and performance of the school produced by the Board of Management; gives them the right of access to school accounts; and involves them in the process of preparation of the school plan. The act also elaborates in some detail on the functions and role of a parents' association (Section 26).

The 1999 Curriculum

The 1999 revision of the primary school curriculum identified 'partnership in education' as one of fourteen 'key issues' (Department of Education & Science/National Council for Curriculum & Assessment, 1999, p. 9). As a practical manifestation of this partnership, close co-operation between the home and the school is emphasized with a view to helping teachers understand children's needs and plan their work more effectively. Such co-operation should also 'help build a shared understanding of the principles of the curriculum, the learning goals of the school and the approaches and methodologies it adopts' (p. 22).

The Education Welfare Act

Bunreacht na hEireann (1937) linked the right of a child to be educated to the right and duty of parents, within a family environment, to provide that education. The implication of this is that parents have the right to educate their children without recourse to schools or formally trained teachers. However, the provisions of the Education Welfare Act (1999) vest a supervisory role in the state to ensure that children who are not educated in recognized schools receive a certain minimum standard of education. The terms of the act require parents who choose to have their children educated in a place other than in such a school to register the children on a national Register of Children Receiving Education in a Place other than a School. Parents must also specify the time and place at which a child receives its education. The officers of the National Education Welfare Board are then required to inspect the 'premises, equipment and materials' that are used in the provision of education and to 'carry out an assessment of the child as to his or her intellectual, emotional and physical development.' Thus, while parents have a constitutional right to educate their children, it is subject to approval by the state.

The Education Welfare Act also impacts on the strategy of the Department of Education and Science relating to disadvantage in that the Education Welfare Officers appointed under its provisions are required to

promote regular school attendance and to prevent absenteeism and early school leaving, focusing in particular on children at risk.

DEVELOPMENTS THAT FOCUS ON EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

In the 1960s, interest in education began to focus on a cohort of pupils loosely termed 'disadvantaged' defined at the time as children who because of sociocultural reasons come 'into the school system with knowledge, skills and attitudes which make adjustment difficult and impede learning' (Kellaghan, 1977b, p.12). While the problem of disadvantage was not a new phenomenon, it began to assume increasing importance as society became more industrialized and urbanized. Given the long-established evidence on the relationship between home factors and children's cognitive development and academic success, interest in educational disadvantage inevitably led to a focus on the role of the home. Thus, parental involvement in education became linked to the issue of addressing disadvantage, a link that was given practical expression in government-sponsored early intervention programmes in the United States (Head Start) directed at young, socially disadvantaged children (and their families) to prepare them for school. The involvement of the child's family as an active participant was perceived to be crucial to the long-term success of such programmes. Bronfenbrenner (1976) concluded that 'the involvement of the child's family as an active participant is critical to the success of the intervention programme. Without such involvement, any effect of intervention, at least in the cognitive sphere, appears to erode fairly rapidly once the programme ends' (p. 252). The Head Start programme influenced efforts in Ireland to address problems associated with educational disadvantage.

Preschool Education: The Rutland Street Project

In 1969, in co-operation with the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, the Department of Education provided funding for the establishment of a preschool programme for children aged three and four years (the Rutland Street Project) with the specific aim of preparing them for primary school in a disadvantaged area in Dublin. The programme had two major components: a specially designed curriculum planned primarily with cognitive-scholastic objectives in mind and a programme of parental involvement. The programme for parental involvement required teachers to visit the homes of children to observe each individual child's home circumstances. Parents were encouraged to visit the preschool, to spend some time in classrooms, and to

participate in classroom activities so that they could familiarize themselves with teaching and learning objectives and methodologies. Parent-teacher meetings were held and specific strategies were implemented to encourage maximum attendance (Kellaghan, 1977b). An evaluation of the programme, carried out over a period of five years, provided evidence of an improvement in the achievements of participants in areas regarded as necessary for success in school. Parents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the programme, and perceived it to have had a very positive effect on their children.

The programme was the first initiative in Ireland to include parental involvement as a specific component of an overall strategy to deal with educational disadvantage and contained many elements that were to become central to later government strategy. In particular, the emphasis on early intervention, home visitations, reaching out to parents who were reluctant to become involved with the school, provision of targeted financial resources, and linking education with other agencies were all to become major aspects of future provision for children living in disadvantaged conditions.

Designated Area Scheme

Tackling educational disadvantage continued as a major priority for government in the 1980s and, while the terminology gradually evolved so that reference was made to promoting social inclusion, schemes to promote parental involvement continued as a major focus of the initiatives of the Department of Education and Science. The first such initiative was the Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage (DAS), established in 1984. Schools were admitted to the DAS on the basis of a combination of various socioeconomic indicators, such as level of unemployment, and an assessment by school inspectors of the level of need. Altogether, 190 schools were designated, and each school received a grant (£12.70 per pupil) to assist in the purchase of books and equipment and a second grant (£6.35 per pupil) to foster the development of home-school relations. An evaluation of the scheme revealed that while the first grant was being used well, the quantity and quality of activities implemented under the second grant varied widely, and in some instances did not exist at all (Archer & Shortt, 2003).

The Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme

As a result of the success of the DAS, funds to schools were substantially increased to provide for the establishment of the Home-School-Community

Liaison Scheme as a pilot project in 1990. The scheme began with the appointment of 31 teachers as Home-School-Community Liaison coordinators serving 55 schools with designated disadvantage status. The scheme was extended to all DAS schools in 1999 and continued to represent a significant aspect of the Department's strategy for promoting social inclusion.

In articulating the basic principles of the scheme, the Department of Education and Science emphasized the theme of partnership with parents, which it perceived to be one of the most effective ways of combating educational disadvantage. 'The scheme is concerned with establishing partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers in the interests of children's learning. It focuses directly on the salient adults in children's educational lives and seeks indirect benefits for the children themselves' (Department of Education and Science, 1997, p. 2).

The scheme included a variety of activities, including 'home visits with the objective of establishing bonds of trust with parents and families, supporting parents in the identification of their support and developmental needs, the development of drop-in centres and parents' rooms in schools, the provision of crèche facilities so that parents could attend scheme activities, and a range of courses and classes on identified developmental needs of parents' (Department of Education and Science, 1997, p. 6). The thrust of the scheme was to develop parents' awareness of their capacities, leading to the overall enhancement of their self-confidence and esteem.

Since 1990, the scheme has moved from pilot project status to a mainstream programme and has become a major component of the response of the Department of Education and Science to social exclusion (Department of Education and Science, 2005). An evaluation of the scheme revealed positive effects on pupils, such as improved behaviour, improved school attendance, improved scholastic achievement, greater care in their school work, and more positive attitudes to school, teachers, themselves, and their parents (Ryan, 1994, 1999). The scheme generated active co-operation between home, school, and community to which parents reacted positively. Other important achievements of the scheme were the development of links between primary and post-primary schools and the raising of awareness in parents of their own capacities to enhance their children's educational progress and to assist them in developing relevant skills (Ryan, 1999).

Archer and Shortt (2003), in their evaluation of the scheme, reported 'overwhelmingly positive perceptions of school principals and local co-

ordinators on all aspects of the scheme', noting that 'almost all co-ordinators and principals believe that the scheme has been at least moderately successful in achieving each of its aims.' They found 'a great deal of co-operation and collaboration between schools, families and communities' as a result of the scheme. In assessing the work of co-ordinators, they commented favourably on the 'reasonable balance' achieved between the various types of parental involvement recommended in the literature as well as on the efforts within the scheme to reach out to the most marginalized parents and to avoid placing parents in a subordinate role to that of the professional educator.

As far as the future development of the scheme is concerned, the former National Co-ordinator proposed as key priorities, an increase in home visitations, the involvement of parents as home visitors, and collaboration between parents, teachers, and members of the community in policy formation (Conaty, 2002). Archer and Shortt (2003) reinforce the importance of these areas through their emphasis on seeking 'new ways of securing the involvement of previously uninvolved parents who are in the most marginalized circumstances.' They also advocated a shift in the work of local co-ordinators 'in favour of work designed to stimulate children's learning in the home'.

The Early Start Programme

The Early Start Programme was introduced by the Department of Education and Science in October 1994 in eight schools and grew to 40 schools throughout the country catering for 1,700 pupils. The programme adopted some features of the Rutland Street intervention and was targeted at children aged 3 and 4 years. Participating children attended a preschool, based in a primary school and managed by the school's board of management. Class sizes were limited to 15 and were staffed by two qualified primary-school teachers and two qualified child-care workers. The curriculum prioritized the key areas of language, cognition, and social and personal development. As in the Rutland Street intervention, parental involvement was a significant element of Early Start, both in everyday management and in the organization of activities (Kellaghan, Weir, Ó hUallacháin, & Morgan, 1995).

Evaluation of Early Start in the original group of eight participating schools between 1994 and 1998 yielded mixed results for the achievement of pupils. According to teachers, children who had attended Early Start benefitted from the experience in adapting more readily to school and in

terms of cognitive and social maturity. However, the test results of the first two cohorts of Early Start pupils in junior infants were not found to differ significantly from those of pupils who had not attended Early Start. The literacy and numeracy assessments involving second class pupils produced similar results (Educational Research Centre, 1998). A further evaluation suggested that problems with implementation, identified in the first evaluation report, may have contributed to the failure of Early Start to have had a greater impact on achievement (e.g., the absence of curricular guidelines especially in relation to cognitive activities, inadequacy of inservice support, the duration and intensity of the programme, and low attendance rates in some schools) (Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999). Subsequent evaluation studies provided evidence of progress in dealing with some of these implementation issues, most significantly the introduction of curricular guidelines with a strong emphasis on language and cognitive development (Lewis & Archer, 2002, 2003).

Breaking the Cycle, Giving Children an Even Break

Given the range of schemes that were focused on social inclusion, the Combat Poverty Agency commissioned a report for the Department of Education and Science designed to review the adequacy of interventions in place and address the problem of identification of disadvantage. The report made a number of recommendations regarding a new initiative that would constitute a 'comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to addressing disadvantage' and specifically recommended seven elements that any such programme should contain. One of these elements was a 'high degree of parent involvement in the education process, both in their own homes and in schools' (Kellaghan et al., 1995, pp. 66–67).

Following the report, two further schemes to address disadvantage were introduced: Breaking the Cycle and Giving Children an Even Break. Breaking the Cycle, introduced in 1996, addressed both urban and rural dispersed disadvantage. The scheme prioritized small classes in the first four years of primary school and placed a strong emphasis on school planning and the development of specific targets and strategies to meet pupils' needs. Increased grants for books, materials, and extra-curricular projects were also paid to participating schools. The promotion of parental support of children's education and increased involvement in school activities were objectives of the scheme. All schools participated in the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme; schools in rural areas shared a co-ordinator.

Principals participating in Breaking the Cycle indicated that parents had a good deal of contact with schools and were involved in a wide range of school-related activities, ranging from educational courses to concerts, sports days, and homework clubs. While principals also perceived improvements in scholastic achievement, the performance of pupils on standardized tests of literacy and numeracy did not support this perception (Weir, Milis, & Ryan, 2002a, 2002b).

Giving Children an Even Break, which began in 2001, provided participating schools with extra teaching and financial resources, allowing schools to reduce class sizes in junior classes to 20 pupils. Financial resources were allocated to schools on the basis of estimates of the number of disadvantaged children in each school to ensure that the number of individual pupils, rather than characteristics of schools, determined the amount of funding that would be made available. Issues addressed in an evaluation of the scheme included how money allocated under the scheme was spent and how rural co-ordinators managed their work. There was a consensus among co-ordinators that pupils had benefitted from participation in the scheme, while more than 9 out of 10 believed parents had become more involved in their children's education (Weir, Archer, Pembroke, & McAvinue, 2007).

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

A report to the Minister for Education and Science submitted by the Educational Disadvantage Committee (2003) advocated a 'new integrated School Support Programme which will bring together and build on existing interventions for schools...with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage'. This recommendation, combined with the increasing importance of social inclusion as a social and political issue, led to the introduction of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) scheme (Department of Education and Science, 2005). Main provisions under the scheme included the prioritizing of literacy and numeracy in schools through the introduction of specific reading⁷ and mathematics⁸ programmes. Enhanced financial and teaching resources, including the appointment of administrative principals for participating schools on much lower enrolment figures than apply in primary schools generally, were also provided. An increased emphasis was placed on planning, target-setting, and

⁷ Reading Recovery and First Steps Programme

⁸ Mathematics Recovery and Ready Steady Go Maths

on-going review both at individual school and at school cluster level. From a parental involvement perspective, the scheme promised a 'renewed emphasis on the involvement of parents and families in children's education' (Department of Education and Science, 2005, p. 40). All schools involved in the scheme had access to a Home-School-Community Liaison co-ordinator, allowing them to build on existing strategies to improve parental involvement in the middle and senior classes at primary level and in post-primary schools. Breaking the Cycle and Giving Children an Even Break schemes were integrated into the DEIS initiative.

CONCLUSION

The role afforded parents in the education system has undergone a fundamental change since 1970. From a situation in which parents had a limited role in the formal education system (Coolahan, 1995), the principle of partnership had become firmly rooted in the educational landscape by the turn of the century (Walshe, 1999). This change occurred at two levels. At one level, parental involvement was firmly linked to dealing with the issue of social exclusion, with initiatives of the Department of Education and Science designed to promote a more inclusive system. Schemes to promote parental involvement, targeted at all parents, were also introduced at whole-system level. In both cases, the concept of partnership was a central plank in all policies emanating from the Department. Over time, understanding of partnership and the implicit conceptualization of the parent-teacher relationship developed, particularly in the case of initiatives aimed at combating educational disadvantage and promoting inclusion.

The initial conceptualization of the role of parents in the parent-teacher relationship was very much as 'supporter/learners' as described by Vincent (1996). Thus initial strategies, such as the approach in the Rutland Street Project, were based on the cultural deficit model which believed that difficulties experienced by children were best rectified through professional intervention. In describing the relationship between parent and teacher in this model, Cunningham and Davis (1985) refer to the process of 'transplanting' whereby teachers viewed themselves as having expertise, part of which is usefully uprooted and 'transplanted' into the care of the parent. Overtly or covertly, teachers selected objectives, teaching and assessment methods, and corrective strategies. While parents were viewed as relevant to the process of education, and were perceived as willing to help their children, and

appropriately placed to do so, they were considered to lack skills that would enable their children to progress educationally.

In later schemes, such as the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme, partnership was conceptualized as a relationship characterised by a 'shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate' (Pugh & De'Ath, 1989). Thus, the focus of the parent-teacher relationship was changed from the professional teaching parents and making them more familiar with their methods to one in which the ground common to parent and teacher was widened. Parents were transformed from being passive and dependent to being active members in a relationship characterized by shared knowledge and decision-making (Conaty, 2002). As the Home School Community Liaison Scheme developed, so too did its conceptualization of partnership. Rather than being passive and dependent recipients of assistance, parents became 'active members of the community able to give to others and consequently able to take pride in themselves' (Conaty, 2002, p. 191). Thus, the concepts of empowerment and transformation become central to the understanding of partnership, an approach that draws heavily on the writings of Freire (1972) who emphasized the need for participants in an educative process to engage in authentic dialogue with each other with the ultimate aim of empowering people and transforming their reality.

While the conceptualization of partnership inherent in schemes to deal with educational disadvantage is nuanced and has evolved over time, it has been quite static and linear in system-wide initiatives. It assumes that parents are a homogeneous group and that all parents are equally deserving of, and capable of, benefitting from initiatives in the same way. Thus, while parents are afforded opportunities to serve on boards of management, the means through which boards are constituted and their rules of procedure may not reflect power inequalities between various cohorts of parents which can often lead to the effective alienation of large sections of the parent body from management structures, while parent involvement is limited to a small group of 'elite participationists' (Vincent & Martin, 2000).

System-wide initiatives are also essentially product-based, in that they emphasize the outcomes required by schools. However, little consideration is given to the process involved in securing these outcomes. Thus while Circular 24/91 (Department of Education, 1991) recommends that schools provide as much information as possible on all aspects of a child's education, no recommendation is made as to the process through which this information-sharing should be mediated, and no recognition is afforded to the

fact that the way in which information is conveyed is critically important for parents' understanding and assimilation of the information (McConkey, 1985; Vincent, 1996).

While the effectiveness of the various schemes to promote social inclusion have been regularly and systematically evaluated, there has been no similar evaluation of the system-wide policy initiatives to promote parental involvement. For example, no empirical data exist on the extent to which schools have complied with the requirements of Circular 24/91, and there has been no evaluation of the extent to which current practice reflects the recommendations of the Report of the Primary Education Review Body. Such evaluation would appear to be a necessary first stage in assessing the extent to which these initiatives have affected parental involvement in the system. In this context, the possibility may now exist for the overall system to benefit from the lessons learned in the implementation and evaluation of schemes in the area of social inclusion, a possibility mooted by Conaty (2002) when she suggested that the strategies that have emerged from social inclusion programmes 'offer the possibility for a new vision for education at every socioeconomic level in urban, town and rural areas' (p. 32).

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