

Chapter 6

Home-school interaction

Emer Eivers and Ann-Marie Creaven

Introduction

The introduction to the Primary School Curriculum states “It is widely recognised that significant educational, social and behavioural benefits accrue to the child as a result of effective partnership between parents and teachers. Close co-operation between the home and the school is essential, therefore, if children are to receive the maximum benefit from the curriculum.” (DES/NCCA, 1999, p. 21). Valuing of parental involvement in children’s education is not limited to Ireland, and a large majority of countries that took part in PIRLS and TIMSS 2011 (PT 2011) have a national policy to encourage parental involvement in their children’s education (Mullis, Martin, Minnich, Drucker, & Ragan, 2012; Mullis, Martin, Minnich, Stanco, et al., 2012).

One reason for the promotion of parental involvement is the belief that significant benefits (academic and socio-emotional) can accrue. Research has produced somewhat mixed findings on parental involvement, but this is largely due to definitional issues, to collapsing across levels of education, confusion of formal parental programmes with informal engagement with school life, and to poorly designed studies. On balance, the evidence is that parental involvement can be beneficial, but it depends on the type of involvement and the stage of education. At a very broad level, informal at-home involvement (e.g., helping with homework, discussing school) shows a strong positive association with achievement, while the relationship is less clear for formal, in-school parental involvement (e.g., joining the Parents’ Council, volunteering for committees) (Archer & Shortt, 2003; Archer & Weir, 2005; Desforges, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2007).

In Ireland, it is only relatively recently that the potential benefits of parental involvement, or indeed the rights of parents to be involved, have been recognised, although their right to choose a school was highly valued and protected, and the promotion of parental involvement in addressing disadvantage was recognised as early as the Rutland Street Project, set up in 1969 (Holland, 1979; Kellaghan, 1977). From the foundation of the State to the late 1960s, education was seen almost entirely as the domain of school managers, and “parents or lay persons were not welcome by the church authorities as participants in managing primary education” (INTO, 1997, p. 3). In the context of wider societal reform in the 1960s, the church hierarchies began to acknowledge that parents had some rights to consultation about their child’s education. This change in attitude led to the establishment of Boards of Management in 1975, although it is likely that the offer of increased state support for schools with such Boards helped to sway traditionalists. The Boards of Management allowed for limited representation for parents (and teaching staff)¹ and represented the first significant change in the management of primary schools since the system was established in 1831 (Coolahan, 1981).

¹ Prior to 1975, school management was entirely under the control of the school manager, who was almost always a local priest or rector.

The opening of the first multid denominational school (the Dalkey School Project) in 1978 was described as the first real recognition of parents' Constitutional right to determine the type of school for their children without input from the Church (Mac Ruairc, 2011). However, change came slowly, and only three multid denominational schools had been set up by 1985. Mac Ruairc (2011) singles out reluctance of Department of Education officials for the slow pace of change, but it is likely that other explanations – such as difficulties in acquiring sites and funding, lack of a coherent strategy and of an established patron body – also need to be considered.

It was not until 1997 that more or less equal representation on Boards for parents, teachers and the patrons was introduced. Walshe (1999) attributed the rebalancing of the Boards to lobbying by the National Parents Council (NPC), formed in 1985 as part of a commitment under the Programme for Government. However, of at least equal importance was the National Education Convention, held in 1993. The Convention was attended by invited representatives of 42 organisations, and was the first time that what we now call the “education partners” were brought together to discuss issues in Irish education. Parental involvement in school decision-making emerged as a key area where the need for change was perceived (Coolahan, 1994). However, the gathering momentum for change was matched by concerted opposition from patron bodies, which won concessions such as retaining full control of the chairperson role, and stipulations that community representatives on the Boards must have a commitment to the ethos of the school (e.g., in Church of Ireland schools they should be members of the Church of Ireland).

Six documents were pivotal in the changing role of parents in schools. The report of the Primary Education Review Body (Ireland, 1990) was perhaps the first official recognition that better home-school links might contribute to better educational outcomes. Shortly afterwards, Circular 24/91 (Parents as Partners in Education) explicitly stated that schools should be required to establish a clearly defined policy for productive parental involvement (Department of Education, 1991). Next, the Green Paper (1992) and White Paper (1995) both proposed significant roles for parents. The Green Paper was perceived as acknowledging that educational aims can only be achieved by a partnership of parents, teachers and management (INTO, 1992). The White Paper indicated that the NPC would be given statutory recognition, that parents would be given statutory rights to representation on Boards of Management, and that Boards would be required to promote the setting up of Parents' Associations and formal home-school links. It was followed by the Education Act (1998), which enacted much of the content of the White Paper.

Finally, in 1999, a revised Primary School Curriculum, with a focus on partnership in education, was introduced. These legislative changes were accompanied by two key practical changes. First, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme was established in 1990, and second, in 2006, Circular 138/06 advised schools that parents were entitled to access any information held by the school about their child's performance on standardised tests and other related assessment outcomes, and reiterated Circular 24/91's requirement on parental involvement. Another innovative development in this regard is the recent national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy (DES, 2011b), which devotes one of its eight sections to enhancing parental involvement.

Despite these changes, there have been criticisms of how the aspirations for parental involvement have been translated into practice (e.g., Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2005; Mac Ruairc, 2011). Parental involvement in schools is perceived as being mainly about fundraising and rubber-stamping of decisions already made within the school. Parents may feel excluded from decisions about substantive policy issues, and even from school-level decisions that may have significant financial implications for parents, such as a new uniform policy, or changing textbooks (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). The *Your Education*

Survey, conducted in 2004, found that 57% of Irish adults surveyed believed parents had too little influence on the education system, while only 49% felt that parents were sufficiently involved in the management of primary schools (Kellaghan, McGee, Millar, & Perkins, 2004).

The recent Department of Education and Skills (DES) survey on Diversity of Patronage marked a change in the nature of consultation with parents of primary-aged children. For the first time, large numbers of parents were formally consulted about their views on the preferred patronage model for primary schools in their area. Unlike previous consultations concerning new-build schools, the Diversity of Patronage survey was designed to gauge the level of parental preferences for patronage types in a locality and then to see how these preferences could be met using *existing* school building stock. While limited to only 44 areas – all with populations in excess of 5,000 and therefore excluding parents in rural areas – the 2012/13 survey was perhaps the first time that parental choice in patronage was addressed proactively, rather than reactively, by the DES. An anticipated outcome of the survey is that the patronage of some of the more than 90% of primary schools currently under the patronage of the Catholic Church would change.

The gradual system-level shift towards recognising the importance of parental involvement has also been reflected within primary schools, although Irish research evidence on the extent to which the shift has occurred or to which it varies between schools is somewhat limited. In the UK, Desforges (2003) found that the extent of parental involvement is influenced by family social class, maternal education, pupil age, pupil attainment and, to some extent, by the ethnic culture of the family. Peters, Seeds, Goldstein and Coleman (2008) reported that British parents who left full-time education later were more likely than average to feel very involved in their child's education, while lone parents and "non-resident" parents (i.e., those not usually living with the child) were less likely than average to feel very involved.

Available Irish research evidence tends to be broadly consistent with the UK studies just cited. For example, Hall, Conway, Rath, Murphy and McKeon (2008) reported that working-class parents were less comfortable than were middle class parents with the type of language used in primary school reports and were less likely to question teachers, while other studies have found higher levels of parental involvement in Irish- than in English-medium schools (Gilleece, Shiel, Clerkin, & Millar, 2012; Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003). Eivers et al. (2010) found that many parents – especially those whose children were performing at the lower end of the achievement spectrum – did not have a clear understanding of the progress their child was making in school.

All schools are expected to have a Parents' Association, but only 1480, or slightly less than half of primary schools in Ireland, are affiliated with the NPC (NPC, 2010). Whether this is due to non-affiliation, or because a large number of schools do not have Parents' Associations is unclear. However, an outcome is that in more than half of schools, parents need not be consulted during whole-school evaluations, as the evaluation team are only obliged to consult with groups affiliated with the NPC. In practice, a sample of parents in every school completes a short questionnaire. However, a meeting is held with NPC-affiliated parent groups only. Where no such group exists, a meeting is held with the parent representatives on the Board of Management.

Although there has been a gradual increase in parental participation in children's education, not all types of parental involvement have proceeded at the same speed. Epstein's (1995, 2001) typology of parental involvement outlines six main categories of activities through which schools can engage with parents. The first, *parenting*, involves assisting families with parenting skills and supporting child and adolescent development. The second,

communicating, refers to effective communication on school and individual-level topics, such as school accomplishments or individual academic achievement. The third, *volunteering* refers to the provision of volunteer opportunities for parents, at various times and locations throughout the year. The fourth type of involvement, *learning at home*, acknowledges the importance of parents’ assistance to their children with homework and in other curriculum-related activities. The fifth type, *decision-making* means including parents in decisions at the school and pupil level. Finally, *collaborating with the community* refers to the school’s role in coordinating community resources for families, pupils, and the school itself.

Against the backdrop of changed policies on the role of parents in education, and the perception that on-the-ground experience may lag behind the policy changes, PT 2011 data present an opportunity to examine the role of parents in Irish schools. In addition to direct comparisons with other countries, it is also possible to compare the views of parents and school staff in Ireland, and to examine what differences there may be in different types of school settings. The remainder of this chapter describes PT 2011 data related to home-school links. (Readers who would like more background information on PIRLS or TIMSS, or about Ireland’s participation in PT 2011 generally, are referred to Chapter 1 of this volume [Eivers & Clerkin, 2013].)

First, we present principal and class teacher responses to some general questions about parental support and involvement in their schools. The second section outlines parental views on how included and involved they feel in their child’s education. Section three outlines parental perceptions of the academic and pastoral care provided by their child’s school. Section four describes the nature and extent of communication with parents about how their child is progressing, and is followed by a section on how schools keep parents informed about school-level information. Section six examines the frequency with which parents were invited to act as volunteers in school-related activities; section seven examines schoolwork in the home, and section eight discusses the findings.

Generally, Ireland is compared against the PIRLS and TIMSS study averages, where available (information from the Parent Questionnaire is only available for PIRLS). However, in some cases, comparisons are also made, where relevant, with the key set of countries referred to in Chapter 1, namely, English-speaking countries, and top performers in reading, mathematics, and science. As parents in England did not complete a Parent Questionnaire, particular attention is paid to home-school links in Northern Ireland, as our closest neighbouring educational system. Differences within the Irish education system (such as by DEIS status or school location) are also reviewed.



Many of the questions in PT 2011 contextual questionnaires were combined into scales measuring a single underlying latent construct (e.g., a “students motivated to read” scale). Unusually, such international scales were not developed from questions relating to home-school interaction. Therefore, the present chapter focuses primarily on individual items, rather than scale scores.

Staff views of parental support and involvement

As summarised in Table 6.1, Irish principals and teachers were far more positive in their ratings of parental support than were their counterparts in most PT 2011 countries. For example, 70% of pupils in Ireland attended schools where the principals rated parental support for pupil achievement as *very high* or *high*, roughly double the average across countries participating in PIRLS (38%) and TIMSS (35%). Across both studies, in only four countries

(Northern Ireland, Chinese Taipei, Indonesia and New Zealand) were pupils' principals more likely to rate parental support as *very high*. As a corollary, relatively few Irish pupils (7%) attended schools where the principal rated parental support for academic achievement as *low* (none rated parental support as *very low*).

Similarly, class teachers in Ireland were far more positive in their ratings of parental support for pupil achievement than the average for PIRLS or TIMSS. Teachers of only 6% of pupils in Ireland gave *low* or *very low* ratings to the level of support in their school. This compares very favourably with the averages across all PIRLS (16%) and TIMSS (17%) countries. As with principal ratings, teachers in Indonesia, Northern Ireland and New Zealand gave particularly favourable ratings of parental support.

Table 6.1: Percentages of pupils whose principals and class teachers reported various levels of parental support and involvement, Ireland, PIRLS and TIMSS study averages

			High	Medium	Low
Parental support for pupil achievement	Principal	Ireland	70	23	6
		PIRLS	38	46	16
		TIMSS	35	48	17
	Teacher	Ireland	59	35	6
		PIRLS	37	47	16
		TIMSS	34	49	17
Parental involvement in school activities	Principal	Ireland	44	38	17
		PIRLS	33	46	21
		TIMSS	31	46	23
	Teacher	Ireland	46	40	15
		PIRLS	35	44	20
		TIMSS	32	45	22

Some response categories have been combined for ease of presentation (*Very high* and *High*; *Very low* and *Low*).

Irish principals and class teachers were also much more positive than the average in how they rated parental involvement in school activities. In Ireland, 44% of pupils were in schools where the principals rated parental involvement as *very high* or *high*, compared to international averages of 33% (PIRLS) and 31% (TIMSS). Similarly, the teachers of 46% of Irish pupils reported parental involvement as *very high* or *high*, compared to the international averages of 35% (PIRLS) and 32% (TIMSS).

Irish teaching staff (principals and teachers) tended to rate parental involvement in school activities slightly less positively than they rated parental support for academic achievement. Nonetheless, their ratings on both measures were more positive than in most countries.

In Ireland, as in almost all countries, there was a clear relationship between mean achievement and both the extent of parental support for academic achievement and parental involvement in school activities. Table 6.2 illustrates the relationship, using principal ratings of parental support for academic achievement. However, the same general relationship is apparent for parental involvement, and for teacher ratings of support and involvement. As no Irish principal rated parental support as *very low*, no Irish data are shown under that heading.

Table 6.2: Mean achievement scores for reading, mathematics and science by principals' rating of the extent of parental support for academic achievement, Ireland and study averages

		V. high	High	Medium	Low	V. low*
Reading	Ireland	570	556	535	520	–
	PIRLS	527	525	508	488	463
Maths	Ireland	548	533	510	491	–
	TIMSS	508	504	487	470	440
Science	Ireland	539	521	499	481	–
	TIMSS	504	500	483	464	429

*No Irish principal rated parental support for achievement as *very low*.

Differences within Irish schools

Depending on school characteristics, there were noticeable differences within Ireland on staff ratings of parental support and involvement. For example, no pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 or Band 2 schools had principals or teachers who indicated *very high* parental support or involvement. For non-DEIS schools, the principals of 80% of pupils rated parental involvement as *high* or *very high*, in stark contrast to only 10% of pupils in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools (Table 6.3). Principal ratings for involvement in school activities showed a similar pattern. For the majority of pupils (73%) in DEIS Band 1 schools, their principals rated parental involvement as *low* or *very low*, considerably more than for pupils in non-DEIS schools (11%), or indeed, pupils in Band 2 and rural DEIS schools.

Table 6.3: Percentages of pupils in DEIS Urban, Rural, and non-DEIS schools whose principals and class teachers reported various levels of parental support and involvement, Ireland only.

Rating by...	Parental ...	DEIS	High	Medium	Low
Principal	...support for pupil achievement	Urban Band 1	10	48	42
		Urban Band 2	39	61	0
		Rural	44	34	22
		Not in DEIS	80	17	3
	...involvement in school activities	Urban Band 1	10	17	73
		Urban Band 2	29	41	29
		Rural	30	56	14
		Not in DEIS	50	39	11
Teacher	...support for pupil achievement	Urban Band 1	18	43	39
		Urban Band 2	9	77	14
		Rural	37	59	4
		Not in DEIS	69	29	2
	...involvement in school activities	Urban Band 1	4	50	46
		Urban Band 2	25	53	23
		Rural	37	34	29
		Not in DEIS	52	38	10

Some response categories have been combined for ease of presentation (*Very high* and *High*; *Very low* and *Low*).

Ratings by pupils' teachers showed a similar overall pattern. For example, just 2% of pupils in non-DEIS schools had teachers rating parental support for pupil achievement as *low* or *very low*, compared to 39% of pupils in DEIS Band 1 schools. Taking teacher and

principal ratings together, staff in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools were least likely to rate parents favourably on these measures, and ratings from staff in DEIS rural schools tended to be more closely aligned with those from staff in non-DEIS schools than with those from other categories of DEIS schools.

Regarding language of instruction, pupils in Irish-medium schools were slightly more likely to have principals give *high* or *very high* ratings for parental support (74%, compared with 70% in English-medium schools) and involvement (54%; 44%). However, they were less likely to have teachers give *high* or *very high* ratings for parental support (55%, and 60% in English-medium schools) and involvement (32%; 47%). Although this might be taken as indicative of differences in principal and teacher views on parental supportiveness, it is important to note that only a very small proportion of pupils were enrolled in Irish-medium schools. As such, few substantive conclusions can be drawn from these data.

In a related vein, only a very small number of pupils were enrolled in schools where the patron/ethos was other than Roman Catholic (seven schools were Church of Ireland, four were multi-denominational, and one, Muslim). To avoid identification of individual schools and staff (due to the very small numbers involved) the three patron/ethos models are described together. Within the 12 schools, no principals rated parental involvement or support for pupil achievement as *low* or *very low*. Of the 15 teachers, 13 rated parental support as *high* or *very high*, with 11 reporting the same for parental involvement.

Parents' views of inclusion and involvement

Table 6.4 summarises responses to three items from the Parent Questionnaire relating to perceptions of parental inclusion and involvement. Although not exactly the same as the questions asked of principals and teachers, they allow for some broad comparisons. Data are shown for PIRLS only, as a Parent Questionnaire was not administered in countries that took part in TIMSS only.

In Ireland, 60% of parents *agreed a lot* with the statement "My child's school includes me in my child's education", slightly higher than the PIRLS average of 55%. There was considerable variation between countries in response to the statement. For example, only 29% of German parents *agreed a lot*, compared to 88% of Azerbaijani parents. Further, there was no obvious relationship (at the country level) between parents' perceptions and academic outcomes. Indeed, of the five highest-performing PIRLS countries, only in Northern Ireland did the percentage who *agreed a lot* match or exceed the PIRLS average.

For the negatively phrased "My child's school should make a greater effort to include me in my child's education" a much greater percentage of parents in Ireland (29%) than in most other countries (PIRLS average, 16%) *disagreed a lot* with the statement (i.e., indicating that they did not want the school to make greater efforts to include them). Roughly one quarter (23%) of Irish parents *agreed a lot* that the school should make more effort to include them, lower than the PIRLS average of 31%. Similarly, for "My child's school should do better at keeping me informed of his/her progress", Irish parents were noticeably less likely than the PIRLS average to want increased information from schools. For example, the percentage of Irish parents that *disagreed a lot* was approximately double the PIRLS average (31% and 14%, respectively), and in only one of our key comparison countries were parents less likely to want more information (in Northern Ireland, where 36% *disagreed a lot*).

Questionnaire responses to parental involvement and inclusion show similar patterns in Ireland and Northern Ireland. In both, while principals and teachers are more likely than the PIRLS average to rate parental involvement as high, parents are not unusually positive in their ratings of current involvement. They are, however, noticeably less inclined than the PIRLS average to *want* increased involvement.

Table 6.4: Percentages of parents reporting various levels of inclusion in their child's education, and awareness of their child's progress, Ireland and PIRLS study average

My child's school ...		Agree a lot	Agree a little	Disagree a little	Disagree a lot
...includes me in my child's education	Ireland	60	32	6	2
	PIRLS	55	36	7	2
... should make a greater effort to include me in my child's education	Ireland	23	29	19	29
	PIRLS	31	31	22	16
... should do better at keeping me informed of his/her progress	Ireland	25	26	18	31
	PIRLS	39	29	18	14

Differences within the Irish population

Irish data from the three items were combined to generate an “inclusion” score, ranging from a maximum of 12 (parents felt very satisfied with the level of inclusion) to a minimum of 4 (very dissatisfied). As ratings were typically quite positive and somewhat skewed, differences were apparent only for a small number of characteristics (Table 6.5). For example, parent ratings were just over half point higher for schools teaching through Irish, and just over a point higher for Church of Ireland compared to all other patronage models combined. However, as Church of Ireland schools tend to be small, it is likely that some of this difference is accounted for by the fact that, generally, parents whose children attended smaller schools tended to give higher inclusion ratings.

Table 6.5: Mean parental inclusion score and selected school and parent characteristics, Ireland only

		% pupils	Inclusion score	
			Mean	SE
School size*	Small	33	8.9	.12
	Medium	26	8.6	.17
	Large	41	8.2	.08
School language of instruction	Irish	8	9.1	.17
	English	92	8.5	.06
School ethos	Church of Ireland	4	9.6	.16
	Non-Church of Irl	96	8.5	.02
Child spoke English/Irish prior to starting school	Yes	94	8.7	.06
	No	6	7.5	.16
Who completed survey	Mother	89	8.6	.06
	Father	20	8.4	.11

*Based on categories used to sample schools (20 or fewer Fourth class pupils in a school, 21-34, and 35 or more).

Parental characteristics were largely unrelated to overall perceptions of inclusivity. For example – and perhaps surprisingly – there seemed to be no differences in ratings by parental educational attainment, employment status or socioeconomic group. Where the Parent Questionnaire had been completed by a father, the inclusion score was slightly, but not markedly, lower than when completed by a mother (a gap of 0.2). However, parents whose children had not spoken English or Irish prior to starting school gave noticeably lower ratings (a gap of 1.2) for the extent to which they felt included and informed.

Although the overall inclusion score varied little by school DEIS status or by location, some variation was noted on individual questions. Parents in DEIS rural schools

appeared to be most satisfied with how well their child's school kept them informed of progress, as almost 60% *disagreed a little or a lot* that the school should do better at providing information, compared with less than half of parents in the other types of schools.

Some differences in parental perceptions of inclusion were apparent by the population density of their school locale. Parents of pupils in suburban schools were least likely to *agree a lot* that they were included in their child's education (54%, compared with 61-63% for schools in other types of locations). Parents of pupils in small town and rural schools were slightly more likely than the average to be satisfied with the school's efforts to include them in their child's education. Just under half of parents in small town and in rural schools felt that the school should make greater efforts to include them in their child's education (49%), and keep them better informed on their child's progress (46% for small town pupils, and 48% for remote rural pupils). In contrast, 57-59% of parents in urban or suburban schools wanted more effort from the school regarding inclusion and information.

Parents' views of academic support and pastoral care

As well as their views on how well the school included parents, parents were asked for their opinions about how good a job their child's school was doing, both academically and in terms of pastoral care. A very positive finding from PIRLS was that, irrespective of country, most parents believed their child's school provided a safe environment and cared about their child's progress. In Ireland, 89% of parents *agreed a lot* that their child's school provided a safe environment, noticeably higher than the PIRLS average of 66% (Table 6.6), and higher than in all but two countries (Northern Ireland and Indonesia). Similarly, at 85%, the percentage of parents in Ireland who *agreed a lot* that "My child's school cares about my child's progress in school" was well above the PIRLS average of 65%, and slightly above the Northern Ireland average of 81%.

Table 6.6: Percentages of pupils' parents reporting various levels of agreements with statements about pastoral care aspects of their child's school, Ireland, comparison countries, PIRLS average

		Agree a lot	Agree a little	Disagree a little	Disagree a lot
My child's school provides a safe environment	Australia	80	16	4	1
	Finland	55	40	5	<1
	Hong Kong SAR	82	16	1	<1
	Ireland	89	9	2	1
	New Zealand	83	14	3	1
	Northern Ireland	93	7	<1	<1
	Russian Fed.	42	45	11	2
	Singapore	72	25	2	<1
	PIRLS	66	28	5	1
My child's school cares about my child's progress in school	Australia	63	30	5	2
	Finland	51	43	5	1
	Hong Kong SAR	61	32	6	1
	Ireland	85	14	1	<1
	New Zealand	74	22	4	1
	Northern Ireland	81	16	3	1
	Russian Fed.	58	37	5	1
	Singapore	60	34	5	1
	PIRLS	65	29	4	1

In all but seven countries a majority of parents *agreed a lot* that their child's school provided a safe environment, while in five of those seven (Belgium [French-speaking area], France, Italy, Portugal and Slovenia) less than half of parents also *agreed a lot* that their child's school cared about their child's progress. Thus, parents generally were very positive, while parents in both Ireland and Northern Ireland held a particularly positive view of the school's pastoral care. Among our comparison countries, parents in Finland and the Russian Federation had the most negative views (e.g., only 42% of parents in the Russian Federation *agreed a lot* that the school provided a safe environment).

Parents were also positive when asked for their views on how good a job their child's school did in teaching each of reading, mathematics and science. Across all PIRLS countries, an average of at least 90% of parents agreed (*a lot or a little*) that the school did a good job teaching reading, mathematics and science. It is worth noting that national levels of parental satisfaction with how a subject is taught were not always a close match with national performance on a subject. To illustrate this point, Table 6.7 shows, for Ireland and key comparison countries, mean achievement scores beside parent ratings for satisfaction with reading instruction. Countries are sorted by mean score on the reading assessment rather than alphabetically.

Table 6.7: Percentages of pupils' parents reporting various levels of agreements about academic support for reading provided by their child's school, Ireland, comparison countries, PIRLS average

	Mean score	Agree a lot	Agree a little	Disagree a little	Disagree a lot
Hong Kong SAR	571	45	44	9	2
Finland	568	51	43	5	1
Russian Fed.	568	54	38	7	1
Singapore	567	47	41	10	2
Northern Ireland	558	71	23	5	1
Ireland	552	78	18	2	1
New Zealand	531	61	32	6	1
Australia	527	53	37	8	2
PIRLS	-	60	31	6	2

No data are shown for England and US, as they did not administer a Parent Questionnaire.

As can be seen, less than half of parents in Hong Kong and Singapore *agreed a lot* that their child's school was doing a good job on reading instruction, despite the two countries being among the top performers on the PIRLS reading test. Amongst countries shown in Table 6.7, parents in Ireland and Northern Ireland expressed most satisfaction (78% and 71%, respectively, *agreed a lot*), both well above the PIRLS average of 60%. Across PIRLS as a whole, parents in Indonesia were most likely to *agree a lot* (93%) while Slovenian parents were least likely to do so (24%). Indonesia averaged 428 on the PIRLS assessment, while Slovenia averaged 530.

Table 6.8 shows similar data for mathematics and science (Ireland and PIRLS average only). Irish parents expressed above average levels of endorsement for the teaching of mathematics (73% of Irish parents *agreed a lot* compared to a PIRLS average of 58%), but were slightly less positive when asked about science. Here, 51% *agreed a lot* (PIRLS average: 53%) while 15% *disagreed a lot or disagreed a little*, compared to a PIRLS average of 10%.

Looking at parental ratings for school academic support across the three subjects, parents in Northern Ireland and Hong Kong responded in a somewhat similar manner to parents in the Republic of Ireland. Over two-thirds of pupils' parents in Northern Ireland

agreed a lot for reading and mathematics, yet only half did so for science. While parents in Hong Kong were not particularly positive in their ratings for reading or mathematics instruction, they were even less so for science, with only 30% of pupils' parents indicating they *agreed a lot*. In all three, the international country ranking for science achievement was noticeably lower than for either reading or mathematics. Thus, while parental satisfaction with academic support may not be a very useful measure for comparing between countries, it may be of use within a country.

Table 6.8: Percentages of pupils' parents reporting various levels of agreements with statements about academic support provided by their child's school, Ireland and PIRLS study average

My child's school does a good job at helping him/her become better at ...		Agree a lot	Agree a little	Disagree a little	Disagree a lot
...mathematics	Ireland	73	22	4	1
	PIRLS	58	34	6	2
...science	Ireland	51	34	11	4
	PIRLS	53	37	8	2

Informing parents about their child's progress

The previous section outlined staff and parent views on parental involvement in the school, but at a very general level. In this section, the extent to which parents are kept informed about how their child is progressing is examined, drawing on responses to items in the Teacher and School Questionnaires. As data are drawn from school staff, not parents, both PIRLS and TIMSS averages are available.

Teacher reports indicate that parent-teacher communication about pupil progress was far less frequent in Ireland than in most countries (Table 6.9). In Ireland, 85% of pupils were taught by teachers who met individually with parents to discuss learning progress between one and three times a year. The comparable study average is 34% for both PIRLS and TIMSS. Across all countries participating in PT 2011, parents of 37% (PIRLS) to 40% (TIMSS) of pupils had individual discussions about learning progress on at least a monthly basis: the corresponding percentage in Ireland was 4%. Only in Northern Ireland did parents meet less regularly with their child's class teacher to discuss progress.

Table 6.9: Percentages of pupils whose teachers reported various frequencies of discussing learning progress with parents of a typical pupil, Ireland and PIRLS and TIMSS study averages

	At least once a week	Once or twice a month	4-6 times a year	1-3 times a year	Never
Ireland	1	3	11	85	<1
PIRLS	8	29	27	34	1
TIMSS	10	30	24	34	2

In a similar vein, teachers sent home progress reports on pupil learning less frequently in Ireland than in most other countries (Table 6.10). Here, 85% of pupils' parents received a progress report from their child's class teacher less than four times a year, compared to an average of 42% for PIRLS and 40% for TIMSS. However, whereas almost all pupils in Ireland (97%) were enrolled in a school where teachers indicated that progress reports were sent home at least once per year, progress reports are not the norm in some countries. For example, parents of roughly half of pupils in Belgium, Austria and Germany never received progress reports on pupil learning from teachers. In addition, in some of the

higher performing countries, such as Chinese Taipei, Finland, Hong Kong and Singapore, progress reports were sent less frequently than the study averages.

Although ranking first and second in reading and mathematics, respectively, progress reports were *never* sent home for 16% of pupils in Hong Kong. However, principal (rather than teacher) reports indicated that *all* parents in Hong Kong were informed about their child's progress at least once a year, with the majority (97%) being informed at least 2-3 times a year. This may indicate that in some countries, progress reports are sent from the principal rather than from the class teacher, or that progress updates are verbal, not written.

Table 6.10: Percentages of pupils whose teachers reported various frequencies of providing a progress report for parents of a typical pupil, Ireland and PIRLS and TIMSS study averages

	At least once a week	Once or twice a month	4-6 times a year	1-3 times a year	Never
Ireland	4	3	5	85	3
PIRLS	9	17	20	42	12
TIMSS	8	18	21	40	13

Principal responses to similar questions in the School Questionnaire show a pattern of response that broadly matches that from teachers. Schools in Ireland provided information to parents about their child's learning progress with the lowest frequency of all PIRLS or TIMSS participating countries. Well over half (58%) of parents internationally, but only 13% of parents in Ireland, were informed about their child's learning progress at least three times a year. On average, 16% of parents in Ireland were informed about their child's learning progress only once per year, compared to 2% for both the PIRLS and TIMSS study averages (Table 6.11). Thailand, Morocco and Yemen were the only other countries with similarly infrequent levels of school reports.

Table 6.11: Percentages of pupils in schools where the principal reported various frequencies of providing different types of individual pupil information to parents, Ireland and PIRLS and TIMSS study averages

		Never	Once a year	2-3 times a year	3+ times a year
Inform parents about their child's learning progress	Ireland	1	16	70	13
	PIRLS	<1	2	40	58
	TIMSS	<1	2	40	58
Inform parents about the behaviour and well-being of their child at school	Ireland	0	10	68	21
	PIRLS	<1	2	35	62
	TIMSS	<1	3	36	61
Discuss parents' concerns or wishes about their child's learning	Ireland	0	17	50	34
	PIRLS	1	6	40	54
	TIMSS	1	7	40	52
Support individual parents in helping their child with schoolwork	Ireland	5	15	32	48
	PIRLS	3	6	29	61
	TIMSS	4	7	30	59

Concerning the behaviour and well-being of their child, an average of almost two-thirds of parents in PIRLS and TIMSS countries were updated by the school at least three

times a year. By comparison, only 21% of parents of Irish pupils received information this regularly. Internationally, only 2-3% of pupils' parents received this information no more than once a year. In Ireland, the equivalent figure was 10%, similar only to Morocco, Yemen, Tunisia and Northern Ireland.

Irish principals' responses to how often they discussed parents' concerns or wishes about their child's learning, and how often the school supported individual parents in helping their child with schoolwork were slightly closer to – but still below – the study averages. For example, over 80% of Irish pupils were in schools where parental concerns were discussed at least twice a year, compared to study averages of 92% for both PIRLS and TIMSS. Also, 80% of Irish pupils were in schools that supported individual parents in helping their child with schoolwork at least twice a year. This is broadly comparable with data from Eivers et al. (2010) showing that most parents could avail of a parent programme to support in helping with reading (68%), while a minority (32%) could avail of a similar programme for mathematics. However, Ireland is still below the study averages (of about 90%) for both PIRLS and TIMSS.

Informing parents about school-level issues

In addition to providing parents with feedback about their own child, schools can also keep parents informed about school-level information. Tables 6.12 to 6.14 present principal responses to a series of questions about frequency of engaging in a series of parent-related activities, broadly divided into those regarding a) school academic achievement, b) school goals, rules and activities, and c) parental support for learning.

On average, across both PIRLS and TIMSS countries, only 7% of pupils were in schools where parents were *never* informed about the overall academic achievement of the school (Table 6.12). With 25% of Irish pupils attending schools in the *never* category, Ireland is unusual in this regard. Across both studies, only in Belgium, Finland and Morocco was parental feedback on school performance less common (from 29-32% *never* received information). In contrast, 97% of pupils in Northern Ireland and 100% in England, the Russian Federation and Singapore were in schools where parents received at least annual feedback on school-level academic achievement.

Table 6.12: Percentages of pupils in schools by frequency of informing parents about the overall academic achievement of the school, Ireland, comparison countries, PIRLS and TIMSS averages

	Never	Once a year	2-3 times a year	4+ times a year
Australia	1	20	52	27
England	0	52	39	8
Finland	32	48	17	3
Hong Kong SAR	7	30	45	18
Ireland	25	53	19	3
Korea, Rep.	0	5	31	64
New Zealand	2	23	45	30
Northern Ireland	3	52	42	3
Russian Fed.	0	18	32	50
Singapore	0	15	51	34
United States	0	31	34	35
PIRLS	7	33	38	22
TIMSS	7	31	39	23

Twenty percent of Irish pupils' parents were *never* informed about the educational goals and pedagogic principles of the school – ten times the PIRLS and TIMSS study average of 2% (Table 6.13). In contrast, Irish parents were more likely to be updated on news about school non-achievement accomplishments than the study averages. Whereas 64% of parents in Ireland received at least tri-annual updates, averages of only 38% in TIMSS and 39% in PIRLS received such regular updates.

Table 6.13: Percentages of pupils in schools where the principal reported how often their school provided information on school goals, rules and activities to parents, Ireland, PIRLS and TIMSS study averages

		Never	Once a year	2-3 times a year	Over 3 times a year
Inform parents about the educational goals and pedagogic principles of the school	Ireland	20	56	15	9
	PIRLS	2	40	37	21
	TIMSS	2	39	37	21
Inform parents about school accomplishments (e.g., tournament results, facility improvements)	Ireland	2	6	29	64
	PIRLS	4	21	37	39
	TIMSS	5	21	37	38
Discuss parents' concerns or wishes about the school's organisation (e.g., rules and regulations, time tables safety measures)	Ireland	3	42	33	22
	PIRLS	3	32	39	25
	TIMSS	4	32	39	25
Inform parents about the rules of the school	Ireland	1	62	20	17
	PIRLS	1	49	28	23
	TIMSS	1	47	29	23

Regarding school rules, almost all parents of pupils in Ireland (99%) were told about school rules at least annually. Over one-third were updated on rules at least twice a year, slightly below the international averages of just over half of parents. Principal reports also indicate that 22% of pupils are enrolled in schools where parents' concerns about the school's organisation are discussed at least three times a year, broadly in line with the PIRLS and TIMSS averages.

In sum, Irish parents are far less likely than are parents in most countries to be updated on school educational goals, far more likely to be updated on non-academic school news, and about average for frequency of updates on school rules.

Irish schools organised workshops or seminars for parents on learning or pedagogical issues less frequently than was the average across the PIRLS and TIMSS studies (Table 6.14). For example, 43% of pupils in Ireland were enrolled in schools that *never* organised such workshops or seminars (compared to a PIRLS study average of 26% and a TIMSS average of 20%). There was considerable diversity between countries in response to this question. For example, over half of pupils in the Nordic countries of Finland, Norway and Sweden attended schools that *never* organised such workshops. However, this was true of less than 1% of pupils in Singapore, Korea, Chinese Taipei and the Russian Federation.

In contrast, schools in Ireland provided parents with additional learning materials for children more frequently than was the case in most participating countries. For example, 32% of Irish pupils were in schools that provided such material at least four times a year, compared to averages of 21% for PIRLS and 20% for TIMSS.

Table 6.14: Percentages of pupils in schools where the principal reported how often their school provided various types of parental support for learning, Ireland, PIRLS and TIMSS study averages

		Never	Once a year	2-3 times a year	Over 3 times a year
Provide parents with additional learning materials (e.g., books, computer software) for their child to use at home	Ireland	19	20	29	32
	PIRLS	27	26	26	21
	TIMSS	27	26	26	20
Organise workshops or seminars for parents on learning or pedagogical issues	Ireland	43	31	17	8
	PIRLS	26	30	29	15
	TIMSS	20	31	32	17

As shown in Table 6.15, there was considerable variation, by school DEIS status, in the frequency with which these activities occurred. Pupils in rural DEIS schools were most likely to be in schools that provided learning materials to their parents (only 7% were in schools that *never* did this). In contrast, one-fifth (21%) of non-DEIS pupils' parents were *never* provided with such materials, with DEIS Urban parents falling in between.

A large majority of pupils in DEIS Urban schools were in schools where workshops or seminars were organised for parents at least twice a year, while all DEIS Urban Band 2 schools organised such workshops at least once a year. Half (51%) of non-DEIS pupils and one-fifth (22%) of rural DEIS pupils were in schools that *never* did this.

Overall, DEIS schools compared favourably with non-DEIS schools in terms of the frequency of providing parental support for learning, though clear urban/rural differences in the type of support provided are observed. This may reflect the different resources allocated and the different circumstances of organising courses in rural schools (e.g., the often relatively small numbers of parents, or the lack of a dedicated parents' room). It should also be noted that the differences reflect the intention of the relevant schemes.

Table 6.15: Percentages of pupils in schools where the principal reported how often their school provided various types of parental support for learning according to DEIS status, Ireland only

	DEIS	Never	Once a year	2 or more times a year
Provide parents with additional learning materials (e.g., books, computer software) for their child to use at home	Urban Band 1	16	19	65
	Urban Band 2	10	39	51
	Rural	7	16	78
	Not in DEIS	21	19	60
Organise workshops or seminars for parents on learning or pedagogical issues	Urban Band 1	10	9	81
	Urban Band 2	0	10	90
	Rural	22	42	36
	Not in DEIS	51	34	15

Some response categories have been combined for ease of presentation (2-3 times a year and more than 3 times a year).

Parents as volunteers

Based on principals' reports, frequency of parental engagement in volunteer work (the third of Epstein's categories) was similar in Ireland to both the PIRLS and TIMSS study averages, while the frequency with which parents were asked to serve on school committees was below the international study averages, but only slightly so (Table 6.16). For example, almost three-quarters of pupils in Ireland and on average in PIRLS and TIMSS were in schools where parents were asked to volunteer for projects or trips at least twice a year. Asking parents to volunteer was almost universal in some countries. For example, among our comparison countries, at least 99% of pupils in England, Singapore, New Zealand, the Russian Federation and the United States were in schools where parents were asked to do voluntary work. Northern Ireland, on the other hand, was similar to Ireland in the extent to which parents were invited to do so.

Approximately half of Irish pupils were in schools where parents were asked at least twice a year to serve on committees, compared to approximately two-thirds across the two studies. Only 2% of Irish pupils attended schools where parents were not asked to serve on school committees, slightly lower than the study averages or in England (7%), Finland (14%), Northern Ireland (13%), and Hong Kong (9%).

Table 6.16: Percentage of principals reporting the frequency with which parents are asked to volunteer for school events or to serve on committees, Ireland, PIRLS and TIMSS study averages

		Never	Once a year	2-3 times a year	Over 3 times a year
Volunteer for school projects, programmes, and trips	Ireland	8	19	41	32
	PIRLS	9	18	38	35
	TIMSS	10	21	39	31
Serve on school committees	Ireland	2	46	23	28
	PIRLS	7	31	32	31
	TIMSS	8	30	31	32

Given the requirement in many countries – including Ireland, England and Northern Ireland – to have parent membership on Boards of Management or equivalent, it seems likely that some principals did not consider the school Board when answering the question. Unfortunately, the question did not address the type or number of committees, nor the numbers of parents involved. Thus, for example, Irish responses may relate only to two parents appointed to the Board of Management, or it may apply to broader efforts within the school to involve many parents in decision-making. The same caveat applies to the data supplied from other countries.

In addition to school-level volunteering, some countries have a tradition of parents helping in the classroom. Therefore, teachers were asked about the availability of adult or parent volunteers to work with pupils who have difficulty with reading (i.e., a PIRLS-only question). On average across PIRLS countries, 72% of pupils were in classrooms where there was *never* access to such volunteers, compared to 84% of pupils in Ireland (Table 6.17). Of our key comparison countries, the use of parent or adult volunteers was almost non-existent in Finland, but quite common in the Russian Federation, and reasonably common in England and Australia.

Table 6.17: Percentages of pupils taught by teachers reporting various frequencies with which an adult or parent volunteer was available to them to work with pupils who have difficulty with reading, Ireland, comparison countries, PIRLS average

	Always	Sometimes	Never
Australia	9	51	40
England	9	53	38
Finland	<1	3	97
Hong Kong SAR	8	36	56
Ireland	2	14	84
New Zealand	6	37	57
Northern Ireland	2	22	75
Russian Fed.	26	60	14
Singapore	8	24	68
United States	3	45	52
PIRLS	5	23	72

Schoolwork at home

Although often not considered as such, homework probably represents the main form of home-school communication, at least in terms of frequency of contact. The NPC notes that “Homework represents a regular link between home and school and as such represents a good opportunity for the development of a practical partnership between parents and teachers.” (NPC, n.d., p.2). The NPC also advises parents that a typical Third or Fourth class pupil will probably get homework on four nights per week, a view supported by two large, recent Irish studies (Eivers et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2009). The NPC also advises that 30-40 minutes homework per night is the norm for Fourth class pupils, which is slightly at odds with the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) finding that about 20% of 9-year-olds (a year younger than the PT 2011 average) spent 60-90 minutes on homework (GUI, 2009). Chapter 5 of this volume (Clerkin, 2013) discusses teachers’ reports of the duration and frequency of homework in more detail. In addition to regular homework, teachers may ask for extra parental assistance at home, particularly where a pupil begins to fall behind in class. As part of PT 2011, teachers and parents – though, perhaps surprisingly, not the pupils themselves – were asked about homework. In addition, teachers were asked about involving parents of struggling readers. This section summarises their responses.

Helping struggling readers

In Ireland, and in almost all PIRLS participant countries, the vast majority of pupils were in classes where their teacher asked parents to help struggling readers (Table 6.18). There was relatively little variation in response between countries, as the percentage of pupils whose teachers enlisted parental help ranged only from 85% in Singapore to 100% in the Russian Federation. In only five PIRLS countries (Chinese Taipei, France, Hong Kong, Morocco and Singapore) did the percentage fall below 90.

Notably, three of these countries are among the top performers in reading. It may be that teachers in the three countries are less likely to need to enlist parental help, due to relatively fewer struggling readers. For example, at least 97% of pupils in Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong, and Singapore at least reached the Low International Benchmark in PIRLS 2006 and 2011 (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). However, the extensive shadow education systems – grind schools – in these countries (see Bray & Kwok, 2003; Cheo & Quah, 2005; Kwok, 2010) may mean that parents play a less direct role in supporting their child’s learning, especially where difficulties arise.

Table 6.18: Percentages of teachers indicating that they asked parents to help struggling readers, Ireland and PIRLS study average

	Yes	No
Ireland	95	5
PIRLS	96	4

Time spent on homework

Parent reports indicate that Irish pupils are in the middle range for PIRLS participating countries, in terms of how much time they spend on homework (Table 6.13). Receiving homework is an almost universal part of life for pupils in Ireland (almost 100%) and across most PIRLS countries (98%) (Table 6.19). Irish pupils spend a moderate amount of time per day completing homework – 47% spent 31-60 minutes while 37% spent 15-30 minutes. Only 12% spent longer than one hour per day on homework, slightly less than the PIRLS study average of 20%. Across all PIRLS countries, over half of children in Hong Kong and the Russian Federation spent over an hour a day on homework. At the other extreme, in the Netherlands almost no pupils (<1%) spent over an hour on homework, and 19% did not receive homework at all.

Table 6.19: Percentages of pupils whose parents report the amount of time their child typically spent on homework, Ireland, comparison countries, PIRLS average

	None	< 15 minutes	16-30 minutes	31-60 minutes	1 hour+
Australia	3	36	46	13	2
Finland	<1	14	56	27	3
Hong Kong SAR	<1	2	12	33	53
Ireland	<1	4	37	47	12
New Zealand	10	36	41	11	2
Northern Ireland	0	2	30	51	17
Russian Fed.	<1	1	9	33	57
Singapore	1	5	29	39	26
PIRLS	2	13	32	32	20

The data shown in Table 6.19 can be compared to related information in Chapter 5 of this volume (Clerkin, 2013). Teachers provided information on homework assignments separately for each of reading, mathematics and science, meaning that their reports are not directly comparable to the parent-generated, global measure of homework. Nonetheless, general comparisons can be made. For example, Irish pupils tended to receive reading and mathematics homework more frequently, but science homework less frequently than Fourth grade pupils in other countries. As the time their teachers expect them to spend on homework is shorter than the international average, Irish parent and teacher reports are in broad agreement.

Parental monitoring of learning

Although Irish schools provided lower than average levels of support for parents assisting with homework, Irish parents were above the international average in terms of their homework involvement. Almost all (95%) Irish parents ensured that time was set aside for homework on a daily basis. Cosgrove and Creaven's (2013) multilevel analyses of the Irish data for PT 2011 show that parents ensuring that time was set aside for homework on a daily

basis (rather than less often) was associated with higher reading and science performance, but not with higher mathematics performance.

Irish parents were more likely than were parents in most of our comparison countries to try to ensure on a daily basis that their child set aside time for homework (Table 6.20). Across all participating countries, only in Northern Ireland did a larger percentage of parents (98) ensure time is set aside. Of course, the frequency of ensuring time is set aside is influenced by the frequency with which homework is assigned. Thus, the fact that only 31% of Dutch parents ensure time is set aside on a daily basis is related to the fact that many Dutch schools do not give daily homework.

In Ireland, 69% of parents reported helping the child with homework on a *daily* or *almost daily* basis, very similar to data from the GUI study, where 72% of the children's parents reported that they or their spouse/partner always or regularly helped their child with their homework. Internationally, 55% of pupils' parents helped with homework on a *daily* or *almost daily* basis. Irish parents were also above average in frequency of checking completed homework (92%, compared with a PIRLS average of 75%), and close to average in asking their child about what they had learned in school. Internationally, 72% of parents reported doing so on a *daily* or *almost daily* basis, compared to 67% in Ireland. Among our comparison countries, parents in Finland were least likely to ask about what was learned in school (37% did so regularly), while parents in Northern Ireland were most likely (75%) to do so.

Table 6.20: Percentages of pupils whose parents report engaging in schoolwork-related activities on a *daily* or *almost daily* basis, Ireland, comparison countries, PIRLS average

	Set aside time for homework	Help with homework	Check homework completed	Ask what learned in school
Australia	65	38	61	68
Finland	77	26	54	37
Hong Kong SAR	68	56	67	49
Ireland	95	69	92	67
New Zealand	62	45	58	66
Northern Ireland	98	76	96	75
Russian Fed.	87	71	83	61
Singapore	72	50	71	56
PIRLS	79	55	75	72

Discussion

PT 2011 provided an opportunity to compare the nature and extent of home-school interaction in Ireland with that found in other countries. Irish parents were generally happy with their child's school. They almost universally agreed that the school provided a safe environment and that the school cared about their child's education – showing considerably higher levels of agreement than in most countries. They also expressed above average satisfaction with the academic support provided for teaching reading and mathematics, but were not overly positive about support for science.

In contrast to previous research, parental characteristics were largely unrelated to overall perceptions of inclusivity in their child's school. Ratings differed little by parental educational attainment, employment status or socioeconomic group. However, parents whose children had not spoken English or Irish prior to starting school were less likely than the average to feel included in the school or informed about their child's education.

Data from PT 2011 show that Irish parents are far more involved in their children's homework than are parents in most countries. They are far more likely than the average to set aside time for homework, to make sure it is completed, and, to provide help, where needed. Their close monitoring may explain their general satisfaction with the academic support the school provides for reading and mathematics, but lower satisfaction regarding science – which rarely featured in homework.

The Irish data contain some contradictory responses. Irish principals and teachers provided extremely positive ratings of parental support for pupil achievement and parental involvement in school activities, much more positive than teaching staff in most countries. Yet, Irish parents' reports of the extent of their involvement in their child's school were not atypical. They were, however, noticeably less inclined than the average to *want* increased involvement. Interestingly, a very similar pattern of responses from teachers and parents was found in Northern Ireland.

Irish teachers were well below average in the frequency with which they met individual parents to discuss their child's learning progress or sent home progress reports on pupil learning. In some countries, relatively limited formal teacher communication with the home was counterbalanced by regular communication from the principal. This was not the case in Ireland. Irish principals provided information to parents about their child's learning progress with the lowest frequency of all PIRLS or TIMSS participating countries. Compared to the average, Irish schools were far less likely to give parents regular updates on the behaviour and well-being of their child, and less likely to discuss parents' concerns or wishes about their child's learning. Only for supporting individual parents in helping their child with homework did communication from Irish schools approach average levels.

Some of these differences may be explained by the small size, relative to other countries, of Irish schools. For example, *informal* parent-teacher conversations may perhaps be more likely in smaller schools, and may not have been included when Irish teachers indicated the frequency with which they spoke to parents about their child's progress. Irish teachers are also likely to view homework, an aspect of home-school communication not considered above, as a key means of communicating with parents about pupil progress. However, while homework can provide parents with information about pupil progress, it may not always provide sufficient information about progress relative to other pupils. Although published in 2011, some parts of the strategy for literacy and numeracy (DES, 2011b) had not been rolled out when PT 2011 was administered. Key new obligations include requirements to inform parents about pupil progress, to raise parental understanding of the standards their child should achieve, and a more general objective that parental engagement is integrated into each school's School Improvement Plan.

In addition to communication about an individual child, school staff can communicate with parents about the school in general. PT 2011 results clearly show that Irish parents are far less likely than are parents in most countries to receive updates about academic achievement in the school or about the school's educational goals. Only for areas such as updates on school news, school rules, and asking parents to volunteer or serve on committees is home-school communication in Ireland similar to or more frequent than in most countries. However, on foot of the strategy for literacy and numeracy (DES, 2011b), all principals are required since 2012 to provide an annual report to the Boards of Management on aggregated performance data from standardised tests of reading and mathematics.

It is difficult to reconcile the apparently quite limited communication from Irish schools (compared to schools in other countries) with the finding that Irish parents are less likely than the average to want more communication. Perhaps some felt that they receive

sufficient information about their child's progress through homework assignments and homework journals. Other parents may have had mechanisms such as school newsletters in mind when responding, rather than substantive information about their child's progress in school or about the school's academic achievements. Whatever the explanation, introduction of the new requirements related to parental engagement in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011b) would seem to provide an opportune time for Irish schools to review how and what information they communicate to parents.

Differences in ratings of parental support and involvement by school type were evident, some of which supported anecdotal views referred to in the introduction to this chapter. For example, teaching staff in DEIS Urban schools gave below average ratings of parental involvement and support. Two recent reviews – one independent (Weir, Archer, O'Flaherty, & Gillece, 2011) and one by the Inspectorate (DES, 2011a) – suggested that DEIS schools are active in setting targets for the involvement of parents in schools, and linking these in practice to clearly identifiable and effective interventions and strategies. PT 2011 does not contradict these findings directly, but does identify some issues that should be the subject of further research.

DEIS Urban schools were well above average on the frequency with which they organised parent workshops and courses (schools in the rural component of DEIS were more likely to provide additional learning materials for parents). Thus, schools offering parent courses most frequently had staff with the least positive ratings of parental involvement, while *parental* perceptions of inclusion varied little by DEIS status. This apparent conundrum does not mean that efforts by DEIS schools to engage parents are unsuccessful. Although teacher ratings were poorer than in non-DEIS schools, teachers of a majority of pupils in DEIS schools nonetheless rated parental support and involvement as medium or high. Also, a common feature of outreach measures for parents in low-SES or disadvantaged schools is that a minority of parents – often those most marginalised – fall into the “hard to reach” category (see, for example, Archer and Shortt's [2003] review of the HSCL scheme). Such parents may partially account for the relatively low ratings of parental support given by teachers in DEIS Urban schools.

In sum, PT 2011 data indicate that compared to the average, Irish parents receive less information from school staff on academic achievement and more information on non-academic accomplishments. Irish parents are average for volunteering and well above average at monitoring homework.

The results of the study raise a number of issues that merit further consideration. First, the role of homework in Irish schools requires examination. In particular, the extent to which it appears to be relied on as the key means of communication between home and school should be re-evaluated. Second, the type of information given by schools to Irish parents is imbalanced, dissimilar to most other countries, and needs to be adjusted. Third, the proposals in the literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011b) should be re-considered in light of the findings presented here.

Additional references



This section does not repeat the core references already listed in Chapter 1. These include the three international reports on PT 2011 and the Irish national report and those related to other key studies such as National Assessments and PISA.

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