

Comparing Approaches to Home-School Links on the Island of Ireland: The BUDDIES Study

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Abstract

Parental engagement in children's learning can have beneficial effects on many areas of home and school life and is often cited as having a key role in children's academic attainment. Whilst parental engagement is part of every teacher's remit, there are different schemes and approaches in the two jurisdictions of the North and South of Ireland. This paper is based on a project that set out to gather key insights on two particular interventions - the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme in the South and the Parent Officer (PO) scheme in the North. In-depth qualitative case studies, which included questionnaires completed by school principals, were carried out in six schools across pre-school, primary, and post-primary levels. The findings highlight stark differences in policy between both jurisdictions, with the role of the HSCL coordinator clearly stipulated in relation to qualifications, duties and funding, compared to a more ad hoc system for the role of the PO. Participants across the case-study sites agreed on the unique skills and characteristics of the HSCL coordinator and PO and, despite the HSCL coordinator being a qualified teacher and the PO being a community worker, both roles were considered integral to tackling educational disadvantage and building partnerships.

Keywords: parental engagement, parent officer, home-school links, educational disadvantage policy

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Parental engagement in education has long been cited as a key indicator of educational success and can have many beneficial effects on home and school life (Emerson et al., 2012). Yet, not all families are actively engaged in their children's schooling and

schemes have been set up both in the North and the South of Ireland to actively address this gap.

In the South, the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme, established in 1990, is fully funded by the Department of Education. Designed to support families living in disadvantaged communities, the central thrust of the scheme is to promote and create relationships between home and school; between teachers and parents. It focuses directly on the significant adult in children's lives (the parent) but is child-centred, and seeks to promote collaboration between school, home and the community (Conaty, 2002). Specifically, the HSCL coordinator works with parents whose children are at risk of educational disadvantage via a range of different avenues, including provision of home visitations, parents' classes, and a designated room for parents in their child's school. Providing this room within the school building visibly showcases the relationship between school and home. Parents are provided with a safe, welcoming environment where they can come to meet other parents, wait for their children, or attend classes within the school.

In the North, the Parent Officer (PO) role exists more on an ad hoc basis, with no centrally-defined job description. Schools have freedom to allocate funds according to their own priorities. This place-based approach has led to a less formalised landscape in relation to parental engagement, with little information available on the number of POs in schools or on the activities carried out.

Study Aims and Methods

Given the very different approaches to parental engagement in both jurisdictions, the BUDDIES study (Walsh et al., 2022) aimed to bring together key insights on the role of HSCL coordinators and POs across the island of Ireland. Focusing principally on a qualitative research design, the study set out to uncover what the HSCL coordinator/PO role looks like in both policy (Phase One) and practice (Phase Two). In Phase One, a desk-based scoping review was undertaken to examine the policy landscape in relation to both roles. This was complemented by an exploration of literature, to allow for a review of the HSCL coordinator/PO role potential. For Phase Two, an in-depth qualitative research approach was chosen.

Participants

Six schools participated in the study, three from Northern Ireland (NI) and three from the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and all school phases or levels (preschool, primary and post-primary) were represented. The schools were purposively recruited, the main inclusion criterion being the use of a HSCL coordinator or PO. In-depth qualitative case studies were conducted in each setting. These comprised of one-to-one interviews and focus

groups with HSCL coordinators or POs, school leaders, teachers, and parents (Table 1). One policymaker from the South and one from the North also took part in the study.

A form of light touch observation was carried out across most of the schools to gain a deeper insight into the realities of parental engagement in each setting. A short online questionnaire was also distributed to school principals/leaders in an effort to uncover some of the high-level issues regarding types of schools, funding sources, employment status, and job or role of the HSCL coordinator/PO (further details and results of the questionnaire analysis are reported in Walsh et al., 2022).

Interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim, and analysed using MaxQDA, following Albon and Mukherji's (2018) steps for analysis of qualitative data. A process of thematic analysis took place based on a "grounded" approach allowing the themes to emerge from the data.

Study Themes and Findings

Four main themes were identified and the findings are organised and presented around these in the following sections. Section one explains how, across both the North and the South, HSCL coordinators/POs are considered from a policy perspective. Section two outlines how HSCL coordinators/POs operate in practice, and attempts to create a picture of "best practice" across both jurisdictions. Section three discusses the level of importance or value attributed to the role by relevant stakeholders within each setting, while section four examines how the HSCL coordinator/PO operates in terms of educational disadvantage.

HSCL Coordinator/PO as Policy

A review of policy documents pertaining to parental engagement across the North and the South highlighted that the greatest difference between both jurisdictions relates to how the role of the HSCL coordinator/PO was considered. The review reinforced how the HSCL scheme is a highly-developed government-funded policy initiative where all DEIS¹ urban primary schools and all DEIS post-primary schools have access to a full-time HSCL Coordinator. HSCL coordinators are employed by their schools and are paid by the Department of Education. They may have responsibility for more than one school, but are employed by only one of the schools they serve, known as their "base school" (Archer & Shortt, 2003, p. 50). The HSCL coordinator, according to policy stipulation, must be a qualified teacher who is already employed within the school, and in receipt of a teacher's salary, but who can be released from all teaching duties to focus solely on parental engagement. The HSCL scheme is *"well-funded and is very well-received by schools in the South"* and is considered *"the jewel in the crown"*

¹ DEIS refers to the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools scheme, which was established in 2005 as an integrated approach to educational inclusion through supports targeted at schools in disadvantaged communities.

(ROI, policymaker). This perspective was underpinned by stakeholder comments throughout the study in the South, where principals suggested that the role of the HSCL coordinator is essential to children's success and central to their needs within a DEIS setting. One school principal stated that *"I see it as a must if we're to succeed."* (primary principal, ROI). In the Northern context, the role of PO appears much more ad hoc in nature. No reference could be found to a formal job description for POs. There is little government intervention in terms of direct funding and streamlining. Instead, the role is solely at the discretion of school principals, where *"we very much have an open door sort of policy"* (primary principal, NI).

In both jurisdictions, funding for parental engagement is subject to eligibility criteria and targeted to benefit pupils and families from disadvantaged social groups. This is in keeping with an overall aim to reduce educational disadvantage that informs policies across the island of Ireland. In the North, the schools eligible for funding to support parental engagement are determined on a year-by-year basis. The schools are identified in accordance with the proportion of pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) or living in an area classified as disadvantaged, through the Extended Schools Programme. Although it is not specified that these funds should support the role of a PO, in practice, the available financial resources extend to POs being employed only on a part-time and temporary basis. According to a preschool principal in the North, unless schools have additional funding, or funds within their own budget, *"we are often very much trying to get people in the door on our own"* (primary principal, NI). Data on recent funding amounts also suggest that a full-time member of staff, whose role it is to work with parents, could be funded exclusively through the Extended Schools Programme. For most schools in the North, however, this is currently not feasible due to the costs involved in the programme (Department of Education, NI, 2021).

It is also important to note that allocation of the Extended Schools Programme is based on level of need rather than on geographical location, which means that it serves both rural and urban communities and is available to all school levels/phases including preschool. This is in contrast to schools in the South as, despite the extent of and high level of funding in DEIS, the HSCL scheme currently excludes rural primary schools and does not have a formal status within the early years' sector. From an early intervention perspective, this is particularly significant, and runs counter to research evidence that highlights the significance of home-school liaison beginning as early as possible (Henrich, 2013). The lack of a formal focus within the early years' sector has been recognised by policymakers in the South, and, as such, several pilot schemes have been set up to focus specifically on early years. The impact of these has yet to be felt, however. Additionally, the Republic's Department of Education argues that parental engagement with early years is targeted through certain aspects of the HSCL coordinator's work as children transition from preschool to primary education (Department of Education and Skills Circular 0016/2019). This reinforces the focus on transition and engagement, but is dependent upon the workload of individual

coordinators. Findings from this study referenced HSCL coordinators focusing their work on programmes such as “Get Ready with Teddy” and creating welcome packs for their respective schools: *“I have to say out of all of the things I spend my grant money on, I love it, I love making those packs...they are incredibly important”* (primary HSCL coordinator, ROI). This highlights how important it is to have a support system in place in the early years. Parental engagement from an early age can help minimise fears, alleviate problems, and allow for knowledge sharing, even before a child starts school. One school principal mentioned that the HSCL visits every play school and crèche in their locality talking to parents, crèche leaders, and administrators *“just to see if there’s anything we need to know”* (primary principal, ROI). With over 70 incoming junior infants in that particular school, the principal mentioned that the HSCL coordinator will have *“all the hard work and the slog done before we put them into classes”* (primary principal, ROI). This allows for resources to be allocated, reassurances to be given, and links to be strengthened, *“getting them on board from the get go”* (primary principal, ROI). As one PO in the North highlighted, it allows for a strong bond to evolve between home and school as the parents *“are frightened you know, I think the parents are worse than the children sometimes. So they can ask us loads of questions and anything that they needed sorted out before they came, we kind of did that”* (primary PO, NI). These comments underline agreement about the importance of parental engagement in the early years between practitioners in the North and South.

HSCL Coordinator/PO in Practice

The discourse on parental engagement in both the North and the South was very positive. There was extensive evidence of how schools value the role of the parent, and how they wished to support meaningful engagement. The findings also indicate that the skills and attributes of the HSCL coordinator/PO are perceived as key to the success of the role. It was appreciated that HSCL coordinators/POs bring their own unique skillset (policymaker, ROI) to the work they perform, and that certain characteristics are considered necessary to ensure successful outcomes. Typically, it was agreed that HSCL/POs should be warm, sensitive, caring, approachable and empathetic individuals who are able to form appropriate relationships with others. As one principal in the South commented *“I know her [HSCL coordinator] personality is amazing, she is kind and practical, she seems to be all things to all people”* (primary principal, ROI). There was an understanding that the HSCL coordinator/PO needed to be genuine and trustworthy, as well as being a good communicator. An effective HSCL coordinator/PO, according to this study, is someone who is personable, sociable and highly professional in their approach.

Findings highlighted that providing activities and opportunities for parents to meet is an essential component of the HSCL/PO scheme across both the North and the South. Work with parents, according to Tusla (2018), should be carried out via a range of

avenues, such as engaging in home visitations, providing a parents' room in schools, and offering classes and course for parents. Focusing on the practical ways in which schools engage with pupils' families, it was evident that there are many similarities across both jurisdictions. It was indicated that the central aim of all activities was to strengthen the links between home and school, thus reinforcing the educational experiences of pupils. Central to discussions on the range of activities provided was a distinct focus on supporting learning for parents, "*giving them the best foundation for learning*" (primary teacher, NI). This coincides with best practice recommended in the research literature where interventions that address parents' own role construction and support their ability to engage with their children's learning in the home are considered most successful (Emerson et al., 2012; Higgins & Katsipataki, 2015). HSCL coordinators were eager to highlight the high levels of participation in events and activities they were involved in such as "One Book, One Town" and "Cuddle and Read". Parents involved in these, and similar, initiatives spoke out about feeling reassured and "*happy*" that they had taken part as, previously, one explained, "*phonics was alien to me*" (parent, ROI). This was also echoed in ad hoc events in the North, with one PO speaking about literacy coffee mornings which had focused on sharing best practices with parents around reading. Such was the success of the coffee mornings, that, when Covid-19 occurred, they were replaced with Facebook live sessions where parents engaged with literacy support online.

One of the key disparities between North and South relates to the function of a HSCL coordinator being fulfilled by a teacher and that of a PO being provided by a community-based worker. In the South, it was argued that a teacher is best-placed to undertake the role of HSCL due to their existing knowledge of a particular school, its staff and pupils. The HSCL coordinator is a full-time member of the teaching staff released from all teaching duties for the duration of their tenure as coordinator. Some of the HSCL coordinators considered a teacher's understanding of education and of the parameters of DEIS as central to the role as "*they know how schools work*" (primary, HSCL, ROI). A teacher, they argued, understands DEIS targets, DEIS initiatives and DEIS supports, and can therefore ensure that this is extended into the home. It also builds capacity and creates understanding amongst school staff, helping to bridge gaps, and raise awareness around educational disadvantage: "*When I was a class teacher, I thought I knew what DEIS was, but I didn't.*" (primary HSCL coordinator, ROI). This sentiment was echoed by other school principals who claimed that having a member of the teaching staff as a HSCL coordinator helps to bridge the divide between parents and teachers. It also leads to more understanding and a more balanced perception of what happens inside and outside of the school setting: "*I think having the word teacher in it is really important, because it's the teacher who has the connection with the staff, and that's what makes the difference. That's what helps teachers to say - Okay, should we give it a go? We'll try*" (primary principal, ROI). Others, mainly from the North, believed that someone who lives in the community, understands the community and

is a member of that community may be less intimidating and in turn more successful in terms of breaking down barriers and creating a positive working partnership. From this perspective, life experience was considered fundamental to the role of PO: *"they need to have lived in the real world and got a wee bit of life experience"* (primary teacher, NI).

Despite this fundamental and significant difference between teacher and community worker, there was consensus about the significant advantages to employing an individual with sufficient time to devote to this important designated role. Furthermore, it was agreed that it is critically important to find the right person with the right fit for the community in which they will be working.

HSCL Coordinator/PO as Value

There was evidence that the role of the HSCL coordinator/PO is highly valued amongst school communities, and a culture of support for parental involvement was evident across all case-study sites. This was reflected in the discourse of associated stakeholders (principals, senior leaders, teachers, HSCL coordinators, parents and policymakers), irrespective of jurisdiction or school phase/level. The position of the HSCL coordinator/PO was described as *"intrinsic to the school"* (primary teacher, ROI), *"hugely important"* (post-primary principal, NI) with one teacher commenting that they *"couldn't cope without them"* (primary teacher, ROI).

The HSCL coordinator was considered central to the success of parental engagement. Having a dedicated post-holder within school communities, whose role is focused entirely on parental involvement, helps to alleviate and minimise everyday pressures within the school. School principals and teachers regarded the role as an essential support, which allowed meaningful partnerships to evolve between families and schools. This sentiment was echoed in the North, where it was argued that having an individual, particularly in a paid capacity, working with an educational lens, both for and with families, ensured that open, honest discussions could take place. The HSCL coordinator/PO was seen as being in a position to diffuse potentially difficult situations to help ensure that everyone could work towards a common goal, with a principal in the South suggesting that *"it takes out the aggro"* (primary principal, ROI). Parents also seemed to appreciate having someone at hand with whom they could speak to sort things out before they had become *"big issues"* (parent, NI). In this way, therefore, having a HSCL coordinator/PO in practice was associated with those softer benefits of keeping everyone happy and, in so doing, enabling the school and school life to run smoothly.

From a children's perspective, having a HSCL coordinator/PO was considered intrinsic to reducing barriers to learning, where strong communication between home and school ensured *"the best school experience possible"* that a child could potentially

have (primary HSCL, ROI). Indeed, the input invested by HSCL coordinators and POs was recognised by principals in both jurisdictions as being associated with increased attendance, enhanced academic outcomes, and pupils' overall success, particularly at post-primary level. Having a HSCL coordinator/PO make an informal home visit to families "*opening up the lines of communication*" (post-primary HSCL, ROI) ensures that families engage with the school, and that students who are at risk of disengaging are kept in the system, thus "*breaking the cycle*" (post-primary principal, ROI).

Having a HSCL coordinator/PO was considered integral to schools both North and South and the holistic role they play appeared to be valued by everyone concerned, as summed up by one policymaker in the South: "*Principals love it, parents love it and HSCLs love it*" (policymaker, ROI). Indeed, the only criticism made was that "*we need more [of their time] not less*" (primary teacher, ROI).

HSCL Coordinator/PO as Tackling Educational Disadvantage

All of the case-study HSCL coordinators/POs were operating in areas of significant deprivation, where poor housing, unemployment, mental ill health, poverty, crime and domestic violence were the norm. Increasing numbers of refugee and newcomer families were also evident and levels of special educational needs were on an unprecedented rise. The findings from this study indicate that the HSCL coordinator/PO provides a "*direct link*" between home, school and outside agencies (primary principal, NI) and can be considered a "*safety net*" (post-primary parent, NI) for parents. Both the HSCL coordinator and PO were seen as acting to empower and enable parents to deal with the myriad of financial constraints and emotional challenges they encounter on a regular basis, a support mechanism which was considered "*vitality, vitality important*" by the families concerned (primary parent, ROI). In practice, this involved the coordinators supporting families by resourcing some essential practical costs of education (and home life) such as school lunches, school uniforms, and food parcels.

The HSCL coordinators/POs also tended to act as a conduit for outside agencies, with a multidisciplinary lens evident in discussions and communication. Those interviewed spoke about links with outside agencies, community groups and various organisations with which they had engaged. This was particularly important for those parents with literacy difficulties and newcomer families, who relied on the HSCL coordinator/PO to navigate the school system. Parents in one community spoke about arriving into Ireland and knowing very little about schools in the Republic. Upon arrival at the school they had enrolled in, the HSCL coordinator helped them with uniforms and books and arranged English classes for the new families. A coffee morning was also organised where newcomer families met and created a "*little support network for themselves*" (primary HSCL, ROI).

Breaking down barriers and changing mindsets in an effort to address parents' own negative recollections of schooling, and, in turn, realise the potential of the school,

were also integral to the efforts of the HSCL coordinator/PO. Whilst getting the buy-in from parents who have tended to associate schooling with negativity is challenging, prompting teachers to question their perceptions of disadvantage was another key role of the HSCL coordinators/POs. Encouraging all teachers to fully appreciate the challenges which families within their school communities face is paramount in tackling educational disadvantage. This study highlights that it is the HSCL coordinator/PO who acts as the “*game changer*” (policymaker, ROI) by building effective bridges between home and school and, in so doing, affording all children, irrespective of their background, the opportunity to reach their full educational potential.

Conclusion

The BUDDIES study set out to examine the implementation and administration of the role of the HSCL coordinator/PO in practice across all school phases/levels in the North and South of Ireland. Principally, it aimed to uncover the lived realities of the role, attempting to shine a light on best practice across both jurisdictions. Releasing a teacher into this role is considered best practice in the South and it was widely agreed that the skillset of the individual involved is paramount. In the North, when schools are willing to promote parental engagement through investing in a PO, it is to be commended. Investing in a definite role or individual whose core goal is to build bridges between home and school for the benefit of children can really make a difference to the lives of all concerned.

While the findings of the study highlight differences between the North and the South - in terms of how the role is funded, supported, and considered in policy - there are similarities and commonalities across both jurisdictions. The findings show that the role of the HSCL coordinator/PO is perceived as highly complex, hugely demanding and unique. The need for a comprehensive approach to parental engagement within the education system was indicated across both jurisdictions. Investing in a HSCL coordinator/PO requires consideration at a political level, particularly in the North where the system is less well developed. The critical importance of the role cannot be underestimated and the HSCL coordinator role needs further expansion into preschool settings and rural areas in the South of Ireland.

Finally, though small scale, this study demonstrated that promoting parental involvement through the role of HSCL coordinator/PO in schools is seen as a crucial element in ensuring that schools are considered warm, open places where “*parents are welcomed and valued, and families flourish*” (preschool principal, NI).

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