

**Findings from Study on  
Family Involvement in Education.**

**PLANET – The Partnerships Network  
&  
Pobal – Supporting Communities**

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## 1. Introduction

Planet, the representative body of the local development Partnership Companies, together with Pobal, which manages a number of local development programmes on behalf of Government and the EU, commissioned this report. Before going on to summarise the rationale and objectives of the research it is important to clarify the use of terminology in the report.

### 1.1 Terminology

The subject of the report was to be 'parental involvement' in education, but having reviewed the literature and trends underway, the authors feel that the term 'family involvement' is a more appropriate term embracing the full range of guiding influences in a child's life (including fathers, mothers, siblings, grandparents and other care-givers) while also highlighting the importance of policies and practices that are inclusive of the full family system. 'Family involvement' is the term used throughout this report unless the reported research was examining parental factors specifically.

The use of the term 'disadvantaged' also gave rise to difficulty. Again, the literature review points to dangers of labelling entire communities 'disadvantaged' and by doing so, altering educational and social expectations which in turn influence practice. There are a number of dilemmas here. Firstly, much of Irish social policy and educational policy in particular is constructed around geographic and economic concepts of disadvantage, and in those contexts the use of the term is unavoidable. Furthermore, there *are* enormous social and economic inequalities in Irish society and in no sense do the authors propose that these are semantic constructions.

At the same time, reductive terminology masks the different types and levels of isolation and strengths at work within communities, schools and families and can cause policy makers and practitioners to overlook positive, preventative or protective resources that can be mobilised within individuals and communities. Hence different terms ('at risk', for example) are used as appropriate and when there is a failure of expression the authors hope that the reader will recognise the constraint as linguistic rather than one of intent.

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The use of the terms 'intervention' and 'involvement' need to be clarified. Family 'involvement' in education is defined in 3.4 and can come about organically and usually does in the case of privileged families.

The term 'intervention' is used to signal the need for or practice of an active, usually service-led approach.

Finally, the term 'education' is used in the broadest sense of imparting knowledge that prepares children for life.

## **1.2 Rationale for the research**

The commissioning bodies recognise that family involvement is of pivotal importance to children's cognitive, emotional and social development but that families' capacity to become involved is shaped by a number of economic and circumstantial factors some of which can be most effectively remedied at community level. As a result, they wish to identify effective models of family involvement with a particular focus on hard-to-reach parents, who require support to enable them to effectively take up their role as informal educators, within the home, school and community contexts.

The Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) provides both the backdrop and the context for the proposed research. The overall objective of the LDSIP is:

*To counter disadvantage and to promote equality and social and economic inclusion through the provision of funding and support to Partnerships that adopt a partnership approach to tackling local issues on the basis of comprehensive, integrated local development plans, designed to counter social exclusion and to equitably target the opportunities and benefits of development to the most disadvantaged individuals and groups within their areas.*

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Accordingly, integrated approaches to family involvement that reach out to the most excluded families in society and help prevent inter-generational inequalities are of particular interest.

## **1.3 Terms of reference**

The overall aim of the research was to identify and document effective models for the engagement of parents of educationally disadvantaged children who would be among the target groups of the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme, 2000-2006.

The objectives of the assignment were:

- To highlight national educational policy in respect of parental involvement in education and specifically parents from socio-economically disadvantaged areas
- To identify statutory and non-statutory models for engaging parents in the educational processes of their children specifically at primary and second level education
- To assess the impact of current provision vis-à-vis the target group of parents under consideration with a view to informing an alternative model of engagement
- To locate international models of good practice to inform an alternative model
- To devise an alternative model for engaging the target group in the educational lives of their children.

The terms of reference are addressed in the chapters that follow.

## **1.4 Structure of the report**

The aims and objectives of the research are outlined in Chapter 1. The methodology is set out in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes trends in and findings from early childhood research as sourced from the international, peer-reviewed literature. Approaches to parental/family involvement with a particular focus on hard-to-reach families are presented in Chapter 4.

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Irish policy, national and local interventions are described in Chapter 5 along with evaluation research findings as relevant. Case studies of different approaches to increasing family involvement undertaken by Partnership companies and local development bodies are described in Chapter 6 and the issues and needs arising from the parent focus group discussions are presented in Chapter 7.

Significant implications drawn from the literature and consultations are summarised in Chapter 8 in the form of conclusions, which provide the basis for proposing a template for informing Irish family involvement projects and programmes.

## **2. Methodology**

There were two strands to the research – a desk-based literature and policy review, and face-to-face consultations with a targeted selection of parents, providers and policymakers.

### **2.1 Desk research**

The literature review focussed on research and evaluation published in peer-reviewed journals. Outcome studies and particularly those yielded by meta-analytic literature reviews were prioritised. Irish policy was explored through Internet sources including Oasis (now [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)), material published by Government Departments and evaluation studies.

#### **2.1.1 Emphasis of outcome research on cognitive effects**

It should be noted that much of the empirical research base is strongly focused on cognitive development – probably because there are standardised instruments and indicators that can measure changes in such attributes allowing comparisons between groups that received an intervention and those that did not – and hence estimations of impact – to be made. Social and emotional development tends not to be examined as thoroughly, although gains on these dimensions can have more protective and positive impacts on children's lives than academic progress per se.

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## 2.2 Field work

All Partnership companies were briefed about the project and invited to contact the researchers if they had an organic or off-the-shelf project that conformed to the following criteria:

- Projects that target the most disadvantaged families within communities
- Community-specific projects targeted at pre-school children or primary school children up to fourth class
- Home, community, school-based projects (or a combination) aimed at the parents of young children which address their own parenting or developmental needs with a view to supporting their children in education
- Evidence-based approaches i.e. those that have been externally evaluated.

In the event, approximately ten projects either contacted the researchers or were proposed as examples of good practice. Site visits/project briefings were held with:

- Lifestart National Office, Sligo
- Next Steps Ballyfermot Partnership
- The Resource Centre Priorswood D17
- High/Scope Roscommon Partnership
- Finglas Cabra Partnership
- Clondalkin Partnership

Two other projects (North Kerry and Drogheda Northside) made contact with the researchers and were interviewed over the telephone or returned a template.

Roscommon, Ballyfermot and Finglas Partnerships and Priorswood Traveller Resource Centre hosted parent focus groups. All were parents of young children. Most of the parents who attended the focus groups had left education early themselves and were hence, particularly well placed to comment on the educational support needs of families. The discussion points for the focus groups with parents were as follows:

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- The kinds of supports that parents of young children need most to help them to help their children develop into confident, capable and healthy adults
- The kinds of parenting support programmes that can best help new parents to help their children prepare for learning
- Who should deliver parenting programmes and where
- The topics that should be covered
- Measures that those delivering programmes in the community should take to ensure parents who are in most need of help – and especially those who may have had negative experiences of or attitudes towards the education system – are reached
- The kinds of activities and topics parents need most help with
- The kind of delivery style parents need most help with
- Own educational and parenting needs.

Policy/expert consultations were held with:

- The Home School Community Liaison Service
- The School Completion Programme
- The Early Childhood Care and Education Research Centre

The discussions that emerged were written up and analysed. Themes and points of consensus are presented in Chapter 6.

### **3. International research findings on educational disadvantage**

This chapter begins with an exploration of ecological systems theory as an alternative to the institutionally led model of engagement with families at risk. It also explores definitions of family engagement and barriers to its development.

Currently, there is a strong research trend in early childhood research towards a more systemic framework of analysis and intervention. Two developmental psychologists, Uri Bronfenbrenner and Michael Rutter, are recognised as the most influential and groundbreaking theorists in this regard. Their work is of such importance generally and in the LDSIP context of moving towards integrated multi-agency approaches to community development that it features strongly in this chapter.

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Their research has strongly shaped current child development theory and has considerable implications for policy and practice. The fact that the child is now seen as part of various dynamic and mutually interacting systems – family, school, community, work – all of which influence development, can largely be attributed to their work. So too the complexity of development – that from birth the child brings qualities and temperament to bear on circumstances – all of which shape their development. These theorists make it very clear that the impact of circumstances is not fixed either – even those of a highly negative nature can be mediated by factors in the environment. The importance of Rutter’s work in this regard cannot be overestimated and has particular relevance for the work of Partnership companies and other community stakeholders committed to needs-based integrated service provision.

The systems perspective drawn from Bronfenbrenner’s work is explored under 3.1 below, followed by a section on how risk and protective factors influence children’s resilience to adverse circumstances.

## **3.1 A systems perspective on disadvantage**

The systems perspective can be largely attributed to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which in summary proposes that: *interactions with others and the environment are key to development and we all experience more than one type of environment, including:*

- The microsystem – such as a family or a classroom etc. – is the immediate environment in which a person is operating.
- The mesosystem – which is two microsystems interacting, such as the connection between a child’s home and school.
- The exosystem – which is an environment in which an individual is not involved, which is external to his or her experience, but nonetheless affects him or her anyway for example the child’s parent’s workplace.

Although a child may never have any role in the parent’s workplace, the events which occur there (bad day at work, redundancy, promotions etc.) do affect the child.

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and finally

- The macrosystem – or the larger cultural context.

Each of these systems is characterised by roles, norms and relationships. All things being equal, according to Bronfenbrenner, when the relation between different microsystems is a compatible one, development progresses more smoothly. A common example of this is the relationship between home and school. When role expectations are similar in both settings, e.g. “work hard, do your own work, be on time” etc., children will perform better than if role expectations differ substantially from one setting to the next.

Bronfenbrenner uses the term ‘bi-directional’ to describe the influential two-way interactions that take place between mother and child, child and father, child and teacher. That is, adults affect children’s behaviour, but children’s biologically and socially influenced characteristics (their physical attributes, personalities, and capacities) also affect the behaviour of adults.

For example, a friendly, attentive child is likely to evoke positive and patient reactions from parents, whereas a difficult child is more likely to be responded to punitively. (Berk, 2000: p.27).

It is generally accepted that before Bronfenbrenner, child psychologists studied children, sociologists focused on families, anthropologists considered culture, economists the economic framework of the times and so on. Bronfenbrenner's groundbreaking concept of the ecology of human development, however, viewed these environments – from the family to current society – as nested settings in which a person develops over time throughout the life course.

Fleming and Murphy’s discussion of educational disadvantage (see 5.2 below) provides an example of thinking informed by ecological theory with its focus on the child and family *within* the whole community as distinct from the traditional concentration on the individual child and family.

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Bronfenbrenner's work has major implications for policymaking. Instead of a deficit model of disadvantage located in the child or the family, he asked how society can help parents to support their children. He stated that we must build bridges between home and school – that parents must realise that teachers cannot do all the work themselves and vice versa.

Accordingly, his view was that teachers should help children learn to read but parents should help reinforce that learning at home. Similarly, he felt that it was important for schools to get involved with community projects alongside families.

Bronfenbrenner saw the extended family as being very important to the child's upbringing and schooling. His vision of school was one where teachers would invite grandparents into the classroom and have them tell stories about their lives/culture so the children would feel proud of their heritage. He believed that teachers and schools should extend as many options as possible to working parents to allow them to get involved in their child's education, and in doing so help them to manage barriers like inflexible work schedules and limits on sick leave and other time off work.

The major implication of Bronfenbrenner's work is that the design and implementation of interventions need to explicitly recognise the inter-relatedness of personal, social and economic systems and that attempts to improve learning readiness need to be simultaneously threaded into the different ecosystems of home, school and community that children are in.

## **3.2 Risk and protective factors**

In the 1970s, another pioneering researcher, Michael Rutter, began to investigate the mechanisms by which some children maintained resilience in the face of extremely stressful life situations. Through a series of longitudinal studies of children and their family and life situations, Rutter (1979) developed a list of risk and protective mechanisms that showed consistent impact on the children's lives across time.

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Risk factors were defined as 'biological or psychosocial hazards that increase the likelihood of a negative developmental outcome' (Werner, 1990). The risk factors identified include antisocial behaviour, alienation, poor parental supervision, uninvolved parenting, unclear family expectations, problematic peer groups, academic difficulty, transitions, long work hours, poverty, media influences etc. The presence of two or more of these factors makes the individual more susceptible to problems.

The protective factors, which appear to increase resilience in the face of sometimes overwhelmingly difficult circumstances, include self-efficacy, personal responsibility, well-developed interpersonal skills, religious commitment, intellect, good social support, positive school or work experiences and helpfulness. The implication of this work is that intervention focusing on increasing protective factors could be truly preventative for at-risk children (Brooks, 1994; Garmezy, 1993; Rutter, 1979, 1987; Werner, 1990; Whittaker et al., 1986).

The work of Bronfenbrenner and Rutter has had the effect of shifting the emphasis on risk and protective factors primarily from within the individual to the factors that exist in the community or systems within which we live. While an individual may have specific strengths (protective factors), the realisation of these is largely determined by the assets that exist in the community and society.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) amongst others have written extensively about community development through finding and mobilising these assets within the community. Essentially such approaches emphasise the building of social capital, be it focused on strengthening informal social networks and supporting protective cultural norms, learning healthy social skills or finding positive role models, to build more self-sufficient, emotionally healthy, participating citizens of the future (Schmidt, 1998).

This work provides a strong rationale for community-based approaches to positive parenting and parent involvement. If communities and families can recognise the value of and invest in building and maintaining protective networks, the need to intervene through deficit-type frameworks should diminish.

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Before describing approaches to ‘family involvement’ it is important to be clear about the meaning of the term. Definitions are explored in the next section.

## 3.3 Definitions of family involvement

Different perspectives and/or activities associated with ‘family involvement’ need to be distinguished to understand the implications of research findings for policy and practice. Broadly, family involvement refers to home-based activities that relate to children’s education in school and school-based activities where parents actively participate in the events that take place during the school day:

- 1. Home-based activities related to children’s learning at school – for example, reviewing the child’s work and monitoring child progress, helping with homework, discussing school events or course issues with the child, providing enrichment activities pertinent to school success, and talking by phone with the teacher.*
- 2. School-based involvement, focused on such activities as driving on a field trip, staffing a concession booth at school games, coming to school for scheduled conferences or informal conversations, volunteering at school, serving on a parent-teacher advisory board.*

(Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997: p.6)

Epstein’s (2001) six-level framework of family involvement is probably the best-known and includes the themes suggested by most other researchers. The first level, namely parenting, includes the usual parenting and childrearing practices that prepare children for school. The second level of involvement concerns the commitment on the part of the schools to communicate with families about school activities and children’s progress. The third level refers to parents’ involvement in school activities as volunteers or assisting the teachers in classrooms or the yard. It may also include parental support for their children in extra-curricular activities such as sports and other activities.

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The fourth level of involvement is centred on learning at home and includes 'requests and guidance from teachers for parents to assist their own children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with the children's class work' (Epstein, 2001: p.136). The fifth level of involvement is the decision-making realm where families are involved in decision-making, governance, and advocacy. The sixth and final level of involvement is collaborating with the community to strengthen school programmes.

## 3.4 Towards more systemic and inclusive conceptions of family

These definitions are useful in the sense that they allow levels and types of involvement to be discussed and analysed. It is important to recognise however that practice is not static. Davis's (1991) definition views family involvement from a shifting perspective. As society restructures itself, as communities restructure themselves and as schools restructure, family involvement also is being transformed. The following table illustrates this paradigm shift from an individualist and institutional position to a more systemic and equity-based perspective.

<b>Old Paradigm</b>	<b>New Paradigm</b>
<b><i>FROM:</i></b>	<b><i>TO:</i></b>
Parent focus	Family focus
Family	Community agencies
School	Home/neighbourhood setting
Eager parents	Hard-to-reach families
Teacher/administrator agendas	Family priorities
Deficit view of families	Emphasis on Inherent strengths of families

*Davis (1991).*

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The new paradigm is much more positive and inclusive about 'family' in all its forms. These new beliefs include the following (Liontos, 1992: p.30-31):

- All families have strengths.
- Parents can learn new techniques.
- Parents have important perspectives about their children.
- Most parents really care about their children.
- Cultural differences are both valid and valuable, and
- Many family forms exist and are legitimate.

At the heart of the paradigm change are a number of tensions or issues that need to be examined and addressed. These shifts in perspective – from institutional to family agendas for example – are ongoing, at least in the Irish context, and our success in negotiating some of these trends may indeed be instrumental in facilitating meaningful collaborative approaches to family involvement.

## **3.5 Effectiveness of family involvement**

Family involvement in almost any form produces measurable gains in student achievement (Dixon, 1992: p.16). There is good evidence that initiatives designed to help parents develop their capabilities as educators, particularly in the pre-school and early primary school period, are effective (Bronfenbrenner, 1975; CMRS, 1992; Epstein, 1996; Kagitcibasi et al., 2001). These gains can accrue to children in the most marginalised families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

A large bank of research has substantiated the effectiveness of active family involvement. Desforges and Abouchaar conducted a review of the English language literature in 2003 for the UK Department of Education and Skills.

Consistent findings reported by Desforges and Abouchaar include:

- Family involvement takes many forms including good parenting in the home, the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations

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relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship; contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance.

- The extent and form of involvement are strongly influenced by family social class, maternal level of education, material deprivation, maternal psychosocial health and single parent status and, to a lesser degree, by family ethnicity. The review also found a relationship between involvement and with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it. Feeling put down by schools and teachers discouraged some parents.
- The extent of parental involvement diminishes as the child gets older and is strongly influenced at all ages by the child characteristically taking a very active mediating role.
- Parental involvement is strongly positively influenced by the child's level of attainment:

Desforges and Abouchaar considered the most important finding of the review to be that parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' had a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment had been controlled. Other forms of parental involvement do not appear to have as strong an impact as 'at-home' parenting and particularly the creation of a high home learning environment.

## **3.6 Barriers to family involvement**

Barriers to effective parental involvement are readily identifiable. These can include distance between teachers and parents, lack of teacher training, class and cultural differences, limited views of parental involvement and the public's perception of the school (Moore, 1991). Barriers can originate from beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of teachers and administrators. Lack of commitment to parental involvement, confusion about the role of teachers, concerns about territory and boundaries, fears about being able to work with at-risk parents and mistaken beliefs about at-risk parents have all been identified as barriers for schools and teachers.

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Other barriers include low teacher expectations for at-risk children, schools assuming a passive role, schools not helping parents feel welcome and communications between parents and the school that focus on the negative (Liontos, 1992).

Barriers that have been artificially constructed by parents can exist also. Feelings of inadequacy, failure, poor self-worth, suspicion or anger at the school can create such barriers. Some parents have a 'leave it to the school' attitude; others have logistical problems; and some have economic, emotional or time constraints to handle (Liontos, 1992).

The communication ethos in schools can create barriers. Parents do not like to deal with school staff who are overly businesslike, who appear patronising or who talk down to them (Lindle, 1989). Problems at school also can become a barrier. For example, it has been found that parents who become aware of problems or opportunities when it is too late to act upon them tend to blame the school (Coulombe, 1995).

Similarly, Lindle (1989) found that parents became annoyed if they were not informed by teachers about school-based incidents that they subsequently found out about. Teacher-parent disagreements have been found to increase with the seniority, training and formality of the teacher (Wagenaar, 1986, cited by Lindle, 1989).

Swap (1990) notes that, when making efforts to increase the level of parent involvement, it is important that parents should not be thought of as deficient. Parents should be part of the process of developing and achieving objectives related to school success. A philosophy of parent involvement should be developed and an array of activities should be designed to bring parents and teachers together.

The following strategies have been shown to be successful in this regard:

- Train teachers to work with parents and to view them as partners in the education of their children.
- Arrange contacts in neutral settings; offer informal classes in parenting, English as a Second Language (ESL), General Educational Development (GED), or other topics of interest.

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- Arrange transportation for parents who do not own a vehicle.
- Encourage mothers and fathers to attend and speak out in steering committees and taskforces.
- Encourage an active Parent-Teacher Association.

Finally, it is important to have activities designed specifically for involving hard-to-reach parents (Swap, 1990).

In the next chapter, the factors underpinning successful approaches to family involvement, including those who are hard to reach, are outlined.

## **4. Factors underpinning successful approaches to family involvement**

Attempts to enhance family involvement have occupied policymakers and parents' organisations in North America, Europe and Australia. The EU Commission, for example, views family involvement as a key indicator of school quality.

Family involvement is an area that holds considerable promise. However, it is important to state at the outset that the outcomes from early intervention programmes as reported in Irish and international evaluation literature generally are mixed. The OECD (2001) cautions that optimism about early childhood interventions must be tempered by the fact that that significant and sustained success seems only to have been achieved by small number of programmes.

Identifying effective approaches, together with their key features, processes and success factors, is of central importance to successful policy development in this area. In the sections that follow, processes and practices that have demonstrated efficacy are discussed.

### **4.1 Teacher, parent and social expectations**

The area of expectations seems to have had an important impact on learning readiness and achievement.

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Archer and Shortt (2003) report that several of the disadvantage initiatives shown to be effective in the United States have strategies for raising parents' and teachers' expectations as to what their children can achieve, particularly in the areas of numeracy and literacy. They cite research which demonstrates that some teachers take pupils' social background into account to an extent that is inappropriate when assessing their ability.

Archer and Shortt go on to highlight studies which show that teachers behave differently towards students for whom they have high or low expectations in terms of the number and type of questions and feedback provided – in effect communicating that less is expected from students with poor socio-economic backgrounds. School effectiveness research also consistently highlights the importance of expectations. Archer and Shortt note that the Irish educational disadvantage policy neglects this area and moreover, that there might be a danger of *lowering* expectations of achievement in certain schools by designating them 'disadvantaged'.

## **4.2 Intensity of involvement and delivery**

The intensity of programme involvement and timing of service delivery appear to matter significantly. Ramey and Ramey (1992) found that interventions that begin earlier and last longer produce greater benefits. Furthermore, they found that programmes that are more intensive in terms of hours per day and days per week produce larger effects than programmes that are less intensive.

Barnett's meta-analytic review of three decades of research (1995) together with the work of Wasik and Karweit (1994), as well as earlier meta-analyses by McKey et al. (1985), conclude that high-quality, intensive, centre-based early childhood programmes can make an important difference in the lives of young children.

More specifically:

- Pre-school programmes produce gains of between 4 and 11 IQ points, but while IQ gains decline over time; effects on achievement are more persistent (Barnett, 1995)

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achievement are more persistent (Barnett, 1995)

- Pre-school programmes produce large effects on grade retention and special education placement (Barnett, 1995) and
- Early intervention programmes help children get off to a good start; programmes with continued follow-up have long-term benefits for children; and highly intensive interventions (such as the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP)) are more effective than less intensive ones (Wasik and Karweit, 1994).

## **4.3 School policy and practice**

Studies show that school practices to encourage parents to participate in their children's education are more important than family characteristics like parental education, family size, marital status, socio-economic level, or student grade level in determining whether parents get involved (Dauber and Epstein, 1993). At the same time, they note that schools need to make a concerted effort to help low-income families to become involved, because such families often wait for an approach from the school. These families may also have increasing difficulty in helping children academically as children advance in age and in grade (Lee and Croninger, 1994). Children from low-income families who are at risk of failing or falling behind can succeed academically if their parents are taught home teaching techniques (Radin, 1969, 1972; Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Scott and Davis, 1979).

### **4.3.1 Teacher training in parental involvement**

Training in parental involvement has been found to be important for teachers, but few receive it. (Dornbusch and Gray, 1988). In the US, only about half of the teacher training colleges have parent involvement requirements for teacher certification (Radcliffe et al., 1994). In Ireland there is currently no teacher training in parent involvement at initial training or in-service levels.

### **4.3.2 Personal factors**

Although much of the research on family involvement concentrates on the relationship between parents and the institution, individual attitudes and attributes are also recognised as a crucial element for setting the

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There is a substantial research base which suggests that the extent and quality of teacher-parent communications can increase forms of parental involvement. (Moles, 1993; Dauber and Epstein, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992.

### **4.3.3 School strategies for enhancing family involvement**

Williams and Chavkin (1989) of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) have identified seven elements as essential to effective parental involvement:

1. Written policies
2. Administrative support
3. Training
4. A partnership approach
5. Two-way communication
6. Networking
7. Evaluation.

Fredericks and Rasinski (1990, p. 424-425) identified 13 ways for schools to involve parents:

1. Flood them with information
2. Make it a school-wide effort
3. Recognise students and parents
4. Involve students in recruiting parents
5. Conduct participatory projects that include the entire family
6. Recruit community members
7. Make the classrooms and the school a comfortable place
8. Find out why parents are not involved
9. Have a variety of event scheduling plans
10. Operate a parent hotline
11. Use community members to endorse the programme
12. Videotape programmes for parents
13. Provide support services like childminding.

Key points in these and similar lists are recognition of parents' efforts, the respectful nature of communication and the welcoming climate of the building, particularly with regard to how parents are treated in practice.

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Parents appreciate when parent-teacher meetings are arranged around work schedules (Lindle, 1989). Parents also appreciate receiving frequent and positive messages from teachers.

Those who receive such messages demonstrate a tendency to get more involved in their children's education than parents who do not perceive that they are receiving such communication (Ames et al., 1993).

For the most part, parents seem to prefer informal relationships with their children's teachers (Lindle, 1989). They prefer informal, regular contacts through personal notes and phone calls. They appreciate teachers who take the time to find out about their perspectives. Clark (1988, cited by Chavkin, 1989) further suggests that schools should give parents information that is factual and empowering, along with strategies for supporting the learning of their children.

## **4.4 Changing level of involvement over time**

Parents tend to be less involved in the educational process as their children get older. A study by the US Department of Education (1994) found that as children grow older, contacts between families and schools decline, both in the number and nature of such contacts. While 52 per cent of contacts are positive and only 20 per cent are negative in the first grade, by seventh grade, positive contacts drop to 36 per cent and negative interactions increase to 33 per cent. Volunteerism also drops during these years, from 33 per cent of parents in first grade being involved to 8 per cent in 7<sup>th</sup> being involved.

This decline is partly because of negative contacts with or perceptions of schools, which can contribute to an unfriendly climate that then reduces the likelihood of family involvement. If parents themselves had negative experiences in education, they may already have a poor view of schools.

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## **4.5 Engaging hard-to-reach parents**

Parents who are not comfortable speaking English, or those who have disabilities, may have particular difficulties and experience feelings of powerlessness when attempting to advocate for or resolve problems for their children (US Department of Education, op. cit.). Finding ways to make mothers and fathers feel more comfortable and welcomed in the school would improve the communication between school and parents.

Johnson (1991) makes the important point that, when attempting to strengthen a parent involvement programme, it may take considerable effort to get low-income parents involved.

Such parents can face particular difficulties when attempting to participate in their children's education. They may find it difficult to take time off work to attend meetings and functions. In addition, parents who are not well educated themselves may find it difficult to help their children with homework. As highlighted earlier, helping adults to improve their literacy has a direct and measurable impact on children's education and on the quality of their lives.

## **4.6 Parenting education programmes**

The research base on parenting education programmes generally is weak, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn about impact. However, there is some evidence that high-quality intensive programmes can have lasting effects on learning.

Parenting education can take the form of parenting training programmes, which help parents cope better with behavioural difficulties, or more broadly take the form of home/school/community/family support. For methodological, ethical and technical reasons impact is difficult to establish.

Barlow (1999, cited by Desforges and Arbouchar) isolated 18 from several hundred evaluation studies of parenting education that met reasonable research rigour criteria.

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From these studies it was concluded that behavioural parent education programmes are effective in improving the (disruptive) behaviour of pre-adolescent children and reducing incidences of parental depression.

The Nurturing Programme cited by Desforges and Arbouchar appears to contain a number of elements of good practice. While based on an American model, it has been adapted to take account of UK circumstances. The Nurturing Programme is delivered by Family Links and comprises a holistic training programme embedded in a home-school links/liason service. All of those involved in a child's education and the family – teachers, other support and professional staff – receive full training and follow-up support. The training nurtures appropriate expectations of children, positive discipline techniques, self-awareness and self-esteem. UK school heads who used the programme endorsed it strongly, reporting that it enhanced the emotional stability of all participants. Parents were also very positive about the programme, as evidenced by high retention levels. They appreciated the opportunity to air their concerns and the support provided to regain control rather than being taught 'how to be a parent'.

## **4.7 Family learning**

An evaluation of the US Even Start Family Literacy Program, which is designed to help parents prepare their children for schooling through an integrated programme addressing early childhood education, parenting education, and adult basic education, reports that the vocabularies of economically at-risk children increased significantly when their parents took a substantial amount of parenting education by comparison with children whose parents did not receive parenting education.

'Even Start' families also gained significantly in terms of the quality of cognitive stimulation and emotional support provided to children by the family as measured by the Home Screening Questionnaire (HSQ). The programme design and intensity of involvement were important in generating impacts. Even Start adults and children with high levels of participation in its core services had larger learning gains than those with low levels of participation.

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In the UK, the Adult Literacy Basic Skills Unit Family Literacy Scheme reported similar results. Ninety-six hours of training were provided over 12 weeks to 'at risk' parents and their children in the age range 3-6 years. Completion of the programme was associated with statistically significant increases in reading and writing scores for both parents and children. These gains were sustained at follow-up nine months later and again after two years. 'Family Literacy' children were rated equal to their peers academically and superior in classroom behaviour and parent support.

## **4.8 Home visiting programmes**

Sweet and Appelbaum (2004) conducted the first large-scale meta-analytic review of the effectiveness of home visiting programmes. They point out that home visiting is a means of delivering a service rather than an approach per se and that programmes differ substantially as a result. Some employ professionals such as nurses to visit families. Others employ women from within the community to visit families and act as role models. Some projects target health- and safety-related issues, others are concerned with children's cognitive or social development, and yet others target a variety of child and parent outcomes. They note three common, key beliefs across programmes, however: 1) families are best helped in their own homes, 2) helping parents to help their children is more effective than directly helping children, and 3) children are best off if help is provided early, before formal schooling begins.

In terms of the evidence for supporting these beliefs, their review focused on programmes that compared families who had engaged in home visiting programmes to those who had not. The review established that parents in home visiting programmes had better parenting attitudes and parenting behaviours than other parents, and they returned to school or sought further education at a higher rate. Children in home visiting programmes had higher levels of cognitive and social functioning than other children, and were less likely to be physically abused by their parents. The magnitude of these differences, while statistically significant, was often small.

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However, the results led the researchers to summarise that while home visiting does help families with young children; the question of whether the amount of help is worth the cost of creating and implementing programmes has yet to be determined.

## 4.9 Towards working in partnership

While research has pointed to the benefits of family involvement, less is understood about forms of involvement that are most effective in improving educational achievement. Given the differences that can exist between parents and teachers regarding *how* parents should be involved in education, the challenge is to find ways for parents and schools to work together in a manner that is not only mutually beneficial to them but, more importantly, improves the lives of children. Below are some suggestions that have been made to achieve this objective (Johnson, 1991: p.6):

- Have regular meetings to discuss homework, behaviour and curriculum
- Conduct special parenting skills seminars
- Help parents reinforce reading and mathematics skills in children
- Teach parents how to help children with home study
- Encourage parent volunteerism
- Encourage parents to become educated themselves
- Make opportunities for students and parents to learn together
- Offer community education classes to get parents to come to the school.

## 5. Irish policy and provision

In this chapter, Irish policy and practice in the field of early childhood care and education<sup>1</sup> are described, with an emphasis on policies that address educational disadvantage and especially those that have a

<sup>1</sup> The definition adopted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reflects the consensus in OECD countries that "care" and "education" are inseparable concepts 'and *may fulfil a wide range of objectives including care, learning and social support* (OECD, 2001: p.14). For practical purposes this definition includes child care centres, family resource projects and other 'care' services like family day care, and programmes whose primary purpose is 'early childhood education' like kindergartens and nursery schools.

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## 5.1 The background to early childhood care and education in Ireland

Pre-school education has never been accorded high priority in Ireland. This oversight can be traced to the early enrolment of children in primary schools in the first half of the twentieth century and the low number of mothers in the workforce (Fallon, 2004).

Although the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999) emphasised the need to stimulate and support parental participation in the educational process, a National Parents' Association does not exist in the childcare sector, nor is there a branch for parents with pre-school children within the National Parents' Council. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), established in 2001, is expected to facilitate strategies for enhancing parental involvement; a process, which, according to Fallon, (op. cit.) has traditionally not been strong in Ireland either.

Ireland has no universal system of access to early childcare and education. In its thematic review of early childhood care and education, the OECD (2001) recommended the expansion of access to all 3-6 year old children (as in other European countries) including full-day services and out-of-school care. It also recommended an increase in the supply of childcare places for children aged one year and older through accrediting and subsidising quality services. It further recommended the formulation of a common Quality Framework for centre-based programmes for young children, focusing on agreed standards for services whether public or private.

Such a framework – *Síolta* (2006) – has since been produced by the CECDE, providing a valuable resource based on extensive national and international consultation and research.

The recent (2006) establishment of an Early Years Education Policy Unit within the Department of Education and Science, co-located with the Office of the Minister for Children, also points to the increasing priority being attached to this critical area.

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While these developments are welcome, much needs to be done to bring early childhood care and education (ECCE) into line with European norms.

Irish investment in ECCE, at 0.2% of GDP, remains well below the EU average (OECD, 2004). It will need to increase considerably if we are to achieve the aspiration of providing childcare to 90% of 3 to 6-year-olds and 33% of under-threes by 2010 as signed up to under the conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (2004).

## **5.2 Educational disadvantage**

The rationale for strengthening the quality and availability of ECCE in Ireland, particularly for vulnerable groups, is compelling. Despite improvements in recent years, Ireland has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the European Union (Combat Poverty Agency Annual Report 2005).

Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are at higher risk of educational disadvantage than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Consequently, they are much more likely to leave school without qualifications and much less likely to obtain third level qualifications (Clancy and Wall 2000, Clancy 2001; 1998; 1995; 1982).

Section 32 of the Education Act 1998 defines educational disadvantage as:

*'The impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage, which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.'*

The seeds of educational disadvantage are sown early. Research evidence illustrates that educational disadvantage can be measured in children of a young age. Gershoff (2003) examined the effects of low income on the development of kindergarten children using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 and found that by the time of school entry, children in low-income families had already fallen behind their more affluent peers on academic, social

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Gershoff suggests that:

*'...these findings provide clear support for a broad perspective on factors that promote school readiness and early school success. They are particularly relevant to a current policy debate about the emphasis primarily on interventions that develop academic skills versus those that include attention to both health issues (with necessary attention to obesity) and social and emotional competence.'*

(ibid: p7)

There is a wealth of knowledge showing that children who start school behind, particularly on more than one dimension of school readiness (physical and motor development, language and literacy, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and cognitive development) have difficulty catching up.

As much as half of school failure may be attributable to gaps in learning and development *before* school entry.

Efforts to contain such disadvantage need to take into account what is now known about early childhood development. The essence of that knowledge is not complicated. As summarised by the OECD (2002):

*'Learning begins at birth, and a loving, secure, stimulating environment, with time devoted to play, reading, talking and listening to infants and young children, lays down the foundations for cognitive and social skills.'*

(OECD op. cit.: p3)

Attempts to mitigate educational disadvantage need to begin well before a child starts school, through good quality early childhood care and education (ECCE). How these attempts are mediated is important. In an examination of interventions designed to combat early school leaving in Dublin, Fleming and Murphy (cited in Hanlon (2006)) note that interventions tend to be based on the assumption that the cause of early school leaving lies either with the parents, the local community,

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school leaving lies either with the parents, the local community,

the school or society as *separate* units rather than the inter-related effects of all these systems.

They stress that any intervention must focus on increasing the stock of personal, social, cultural and economic capital available to the individual child and that:

*'...All of these capital elements must be included in any interventionist programme and to omit any one of them fragments and reduces the effectiveness of the response'*

## **5.3 National pre-school and early primary educational disadvantage initiatives**

The different measures introduced by the Department of Education and Science to overcome educational disadvantage are described below, starting with those that address pre-school provision and moving through initiatives operating at primary and second level.

An important part of the strategy exercised by the Department of Education and Science in tackling educational disadvantage is to designate and discriminate in favour of schools serving disadvantaged children. This is a structural feature of all of the schemes described below.

While the disadvantage initiatives generally are school or individually based, it is possible to discern a move towards more systemic approach to disadvantage as indicated, for example, by the remit of the National Educational Welfare Board, which includes advising the National Council on Curriculum and Assessment on aspects of the curriculum likely to affect attendance at or participation in school.

### **5.3.1 National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP)**

The National Childcare Investment Programme, while focused primarily on childcare infrastructure, is a significant State investment in childcare

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The programme provides grants to providers to establish or upgrade facilities and services, as well as financial support towards staffing costs in community facilities in disadvantaged areas. Demand continues to outstrip supply, however. The NCIP also provides support to County Childcare Committees to implement strategic plans which impact on its objectives.

## **5.3.2 Rutland Street Project**

The Rutland Street Pre-school Project (Holland, 1979) was established in 1969 as an early intervention programme for children in a disadvantaged area of inner-city Dublin. It remained the State's only pre-school project until the Early Start pre-schools were established in the mid-1990s in some designated disadvantaged schools.

The Rutland Street Project is a good example of an effective early intervention preventative programme. It has produced impressive long-term results similar to those of the most successful projects in the American Head Start programme originated by Uri Bronfenbrenner. This project began in 1969 with the purpose of developing strategies to prevent school failure in disadvantaged areas. Rutland Street was selected on the basis of high levels of educational failure and poverty in the area. The Department of Education funded the project on the basis of what was normally made available to primary schools, while the special features of the project were funded by a charitable foundation.

The project was influenced by a number of the early intervention projects (including Head Start) and by Piaget's work on child cognitive development. The objective of the two-year curriculum catering for three- and four-year-olds was to develop skills that would facilitate primary school readiness. There was a strong emphasis on cognitive skills development, namely the skills of perceptual discrimination, the extension of the child's knowledge of the world, the development of skills in the organisation of knowledge and the development of language skills. The pre-school centre facilitated 180 children in total. The children attended either morning or afternoon sessions of two and a half hours, and were taught in groups of 15 by a teacher and a classroom assistant. A cooked meal was provided in the middle of the school day.

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A cooked meal was provided in the middle of the school day.

The project also aimed to increase the amount of contact between parents and the school through the establishment of a mothers' club, an advice centre and regular parent-teacher meetings. This work with parents was supplemented by intensive social worker casework with some of the most severely disadvantaged families. In 1971 home-school contacts were further developed through a home-based intervention programme. The aim was to change the teaching style of the mother and to increase her confidence as an educator. Twenty-six mothers were visited at home for one hour per week by one of the home teachers.

The focus of each session was on the development of the child's language and communication skills (Holland 1979; Kellaghan 1977).

The Rutland Street project was evaluated on an ongoing basis, using a control group of children living in the same catchment area. By the end of the two-year programme, participants showed an increase in their intelligence scores and an improvement in measures of pre-school readiness. In addition, a survey of mothers indicated more positive attitudes towards, and satisfaction with, the pre-school, along with greater involvement in the education of their children. However, on transfer to primary school, children showed a falling-off in their intelligence scores over the first three years; this pattern was particularly marked among the children with initially higher test scores. It should be noted, however, that a development gap between participants and non-participants in terms of intelligence scores was still evident. This difference did not translate into advantages in school performance since the experimental (Rutland project) group performed no better on an English reading test than the control group at the age of eight. A separate evaluation of the home-based intervention programme indicated no significant differences in average intelligence between participants and non-participants (Kellaghan 1977).

This pattern of initial improvement followed by gradual falling-off was similar to that found in many American evaluations of early intervention programmes. An interesting feature of the Rutland Street project was a longer-term follow-up of participants at age sixteen. This evaluation indicated no differences between the control and experimental groups in

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However, a number of positive benefits were evident. Firstly, participants reported greater encouragement from home to attend second-level school. Secondly, participants were more likely to stay on until second-level schooling and to take State examinations. They were more than twice as likely as non-participants to take the Group Certificate and three times as likely to take the Intermediate Certificate. Furthermore, just less than one-tenth of the participants took the Leaving Certificate compared with none of the control group (Kellaghan and Greaney 1993). The Rutland Street Centre still serves children in its catchment area and the experience of the project has been used to develop a structured programme for infant classes in schools in other disadvantaged areas (CMRS 1992).

### **5.3.3 Early Start**

The Department of Education and Science introduced Early Start as a pilot programme in 1994. It currently operates as a pilot in forty schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage in Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Limerick, Galway, Drogheda and Dundalk. Fifty-six teachers and fifty-six childcare workers tend to the needs of approximately 1,700 children aged three to four years. Some schools included in the scheme operate two pre-primary school classes as part of the Early Start programme, while others operate a one-year system. Typically Early Start centres are set up in vacant classrooms in existing schools. Centres are well resourced in terms of staffing and stimulating equipment. Two qualified primary school teachers, with proven expertise in infant teaching, and two qualified childcare workers, who are appointed by the school's board of management, run each full unit centre.

The aims of Early Start are:

- To implement an educational programme that will enhance the overall development of young children and prevent school failure
- To counteract the effects of social disadvantage.

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The desired outcomes of Early Start are:

- That the children involved in the programme will develop confidence in their ability to learn
- That the children involved in the programme will develop learning styles which are led by motivated, organised and appropriately independent behaviour
- That the children involved in the programme will develop their language, cognition and social/personal skills to the extent that they will be able to easily adapt to school life in the future
- That the 'learning through play' approach used in the programme will be positive and enjoyable for the children involved
- That the parents of participating children will become actively involved in their children's education.

The Early Start curriculum was adapted from the Rutland Street project and accords strong priority to language and cognition. It also incorporates social and emotional development. Parental involvement is a key element of Early Start, both in everyday management and in the organisation of activities.

Early Start staff are expected to work with their school's Home-School Liaison Co-ordinator, who in turn encourages parents to take part in the centre's activities.

The Education Research Centre is evaluating Early Start on an ongoing basis. The results from the first wave of participants show that Early Start provision was successfully incorporated into the school system. Parents expressed positive attitudes and became involved in many of the school activities.

However, the performance of the Early Start children, as measured on standardised tests when they were in junior infant classes, did not indicate that there had been any effect on their cognitive or scholastic development.

A follow-up study comparing the achievements in reading and mathematics of Early Start and non-Early Start pupils in second class

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This may be due to implementation issues or to a lack of uniformity across centres. There may also be methodological issues, e.g. the narrow range of abilities assessed (literacy and numeracy), or high drop-out rates may have depressed overall performance scores. It also needs to be borne in mind that reviews of the international evaluation literature reveal that in general more rigorous evaluation designs (the gold standard being randomised control group trials followed by quasi-experimental designs as would be the case with the Early Start evaluation) yield modest effects. The reality is that significant behaviour change takes a great deal of effort and investment of time and resources in multiple socio-economic domains.

## 5.3.4 Traveller Supports

Children from the Traveller community are at risk of extreme poverty and educational disadvantage. Infant mortality is twice the national average and although large numbers of Traveller children attend primary school, transfer rates to secondary school are very low, with high rates of withdrawal after Junior Certificate level. Very few Traveller children attend third-level education.

The revised National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS), *Building an Inclusive Society* (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs 2002) makes a number of commitments to combating educational disadvantage amongst Traveller and other high-risk groups.

The Department of Education and Science runs a limited number of area-based and Traveller-focused educational disadvantage interventions for pre-school children at risk of educational disadvantage. These include pre-school provision for Travellers and the Visiting Teacher scheme. Voluntary and community groups also run a number of breakfast clubs, homework clubs and mentoring schemes at primary school level, in particular.

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## **5.3.5 Breaking the Cycle**

'Breaking the Cycle' was introduced in 1996 and was the first scheme within the Department of Education and Science that positively discriminated in favour of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. 'Breaking the Cycle' focused on large-scale urban disadvantage and on rural and dispersed disadvantage. 'Breaking the Cycle' has now been replaced by the 'Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage' scheme but schools originally targeted retain the extra benefits they were given under 'Breaking the Cycle'.

## **5.3.6 Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage**

'Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage' is a primary school scheme introduced by the Department of Education and Science in 2001 and extended in 2002. Participating schools, which are selected on the basis of criteria developed by the Education Research Centre, receive additional teaching and financial resources. Eligible schools may receive additional teaching resources so that teacher/pupil ratios do not exceed 1:20 at junior level. A €63.49 per pupil grant is paid to the board of management of each school, which then uses the funding to support the children most in need under its care. For example, a school may decide to provide for homework support for the pupils in question or to develop school- and community-related social, sport and leisure activities.

## **5.3.7 Home-School Community Liaison Scheme**

The Home-School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCLS) was established in 1990. It began as a response to the need to strengthen and structure parental involvement in schools in designated areas of disadvantage (DAS) (Archer and Shortt 2003). An internal review of DAS provision indicated that while funding for books and equipment was well utilised, the quality of home-school liaison varied considerably.

Thirty-one teachers were initially appointed as liaison officers in the 55

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The aims of the scheme are:

- To maximise the participation of the children in the learning process, in particular those who might be at risk of failure
- To promote active co-operation between home, school and relevant community agencies in promoting the educational interests of the children
- To raise awareness in parents of their own capacities to enhance their children's educational progress and to assist them in developing relevant skills
- To enhance the children's uptake from education, their retention in the educational system, their continuation to post-compulsory education and to third level and their attitudes to life-long learning
- To disseminate the positive outcomes of the scheme throughout the school system generally.

The scheme is targeted at students who are at risk of not reaching their potential in the educational system because of economic or social disadvantage. Home visits are a central part of the approach, and co-ordinators focus on building a trusting relationship with the parent(s) before progressing to educational play-type activities.

A national co-ordinator and assistant national co-ordinators advise on and support the development of the scheme, liaise with participants at local level and provide a link between local and national levels. All co-ordinators are teachers, which means that they have good familiarity with schools. However the fact that HSCL staff work teachers' hours means that there is no service in vacation periods and contact is more available to those who are in the home during the day (usually mothers). Contact with families working outside the home is necessarily limited.

## **5.3.8 School Completion Programme**

The School Completion Programme (SCP) is a Department of Education and Science initiative that aims to improve retention rates at primary and secondary levels.

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secondary levels.

The programme has developed a number of supportive and preventative integrated measures, ranging from social and personal development to in-school, after-school and out-of-school supports (Department of Education and Science 2005). There are approximately 82 projects in operation nationwide. Examples of typical SCP projects include breakfast clubs, attendance tracking, facilitated play, games and sport, homework clubs and tuition in the home.

The programme is staffed mainly by youth and community workers and is highly flexible. Family contact is made at times that fit family commitments, including in the evenings and vacation periods. Interventions are person-centred and each young person at risk of early school leaving is provided with tailor-made supports. Like other initiatives, the programme is partnership-based. Management committees made up of parents, teachers and relevant agencies run local initiatives. While the SCP is impressive on a number of fronts, it needs to be recognised that it commands a relatively small budget, which limits its scope.

## **6. Local/area-based examples of approaches to tackling educational disadvantage through enhanced family involvement**

In this chapter, four case study examples of parental involvement in disadvantaged communities are described. The aim of this exercise is to identify features of good local practice that could be incorporated in to the proposed model or template of parental engagement in education. These projects are of interest because they demonstrate how different communities responded to the challenge of strong educational needs. None of these examples is being proposed as the only or best way to engage parents, nor is the selection exhaustive. It should also be pointed out that the analysis is not an evaluation of individual projects. These projects are highlighted because all have features of interest in

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the context of informing the model or template of family involvement.

## **6.1 Ballyfermot Next Steps**

Ballyfermot is a designated disadvantaged area and as a result Early Start operates in some of the local primary schools. The Next Steps project was developed under the auspices of the Ballyfermot Partnership Company.

It engaged fifteen parents whose children had just started school in a two-year programme designed to help them become partners in their children's education. All of the schools in the area were invited to take part and participants were recruited through the schools (notice board, teacher recommendation and parent word of mouth).

### **6.1.1 Project objectives**

The objectives of the project were to:

- Empower adults to become involved in a holistic learning experience with their children in both the home and community setting
- Promote positive attitudes for parents as partners in the education of their children
- Introduce practical and real ways to enhance the co-operation and interaction between teachers, youth workers and parents
- Discuss the education system and curriculum changes with parents
- Propose an integrated education model to include all significant adults in a child's life
- Explore and respond to the educational needs of parents
- Empower the target group to build local capacity through parent-led support groups and training programmes
- Carry out research on the effects of the two-year programme on participants

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## 6.1.2 Programme delivery

Most of the participants had left school early and had negative perceptions of their parenting and educational abilities.

On entering the programme, few had either the communication skills or the confidence to become involved in their children's education at home or at school.

The facilitators were sensitive to the fears around formal education and ensured that the training approach was enjoyable, highly interactive and parent-led. Small touches like providing fresh flowers every week and including participants' children in celebratory events helped the group develop high levels of trust in the facilitators. Sessions were held in the familiar surroundings of the local community centre over a two-year period. Shorter (8 week) parenting outreach courses were held in the local primary schools in co-operation with the Home-School Community Liaison Service.

Content included:

- Positive Parenting
- Listening and communication skills
- Spending quality time with your children
- Language development
- Reading
- Play
- Experimental art
- Primary school curriculum
- Communicating with school

The needs of participants strongly informed delivery and other topics/modules were introduced on that basis including:

- Bullying
- Literacy
- Healthy eating

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- Career guidance
- Drug awareness
- Civic awareness
- Bereavement
- Emotional Development

The project was facilitated by a Montessori teacher and play therapist and a guidance counsellor and was subject to ongoing external evaluation. An advisory committee with membership from the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA), local schools and community organisations supported the project.

## **6.1.3 Outcomes**

Linkages with the local and national Home-School Community Liaison Service were formed and some HSCL co-ordinators attended the parent training sessions.

In the final six months the group prepared and submitted work from the child development and play & computer skills modules for FETAC accreditation, which was successfully awarded.

Two of the group have gone on to train with the Eastern Regional Health Authority (now replaced by the HSE) as local community peer leaders. All of the group were involved in facilitating an open day in 2007 'It's all about play' for local families in collaboration with Familiscope.

Evaluation results indicate personal, family and community benefits, which include higher levels of play, reading, and family and community involvement.

## **6.2 High/Scope Roscommon**

High/Scope is an approach to early childhood care and education which has been shaped and developed by research and practice over a forty-year period. It is an example of an approach combining parental support alongside early childhood education. The High/Scope Perry School Project was included in the RAND research and judged to have a strong

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evidence base. (RAND research is ongoing, see High/Scope Supporting the Child, the Family, the Community: A Report of the Proceedings of the High/Scope Ireland Third Annual Conference)

Lasting benefits in multiple domains have been measured 35 years after the intervention ended.

It has been implemented by a number of area partnership companies in Ireland including Waterford and Northside. The extract here features the involvement of the Roscommon Area Partnership Company, which is centred on provision in pre-school settings.

## **6.2.1 Aim and objectives**

The overall aim of High/Scope is to empower children and adults to develop their full potential and contribute meaningfully as citizens. High/Scope is a comprehensive educational approach that strives to help children develop in all areas. Its objectives for young children are to:

- Learn through active involvement with people, events, and ideas
- Become independent, responsible, and confident – ready for school and ready for life
- Learn to plan many of their own activities, carry them out, and talk with others about what they have done and what they have learned
- Gain knowledge and skills in important academic, social, and physical areas.

## **6.2.2 Programme delivery**

The emphasis is on learning as a decision-making and problem-solving process. High/Scope Ireland works to empower children and adults through shared control in active learning situations. Links are made with parents through the Caring Start Programme, for example, which provides training and support for parents, thus providing consistency between home and school. In addition to active learning, key areas include:

- Routines for children

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- Listening and communicating with children
- Playing together
- Conflict resolution
- Looking at books together

Centres also form partnerships with parents by:

- Sharing observations with parents
- Focusing on the family's interests and strengths
- Reflecting the community within the classroom
- Providing home visits
- Providing newsletters
- Producing information booklets about the centre for both the child and the family
- Giving parents a say in establishing programme policies
- Having parents provide play materials
- Providing resources to parents to support children's learning at home.

And in the following ways:

- Families share their interests with the children in the centre.
- Staff and parents interact informally.
- Staff receive training in forming partnerships with parents.
- Parent meetings to discuss child progress are scheduled every term.
- Staff work together to locate and access any special education services needed by the child.
- Staff are trained in ways to communicate positively with parents.
- Staff are familiar with the resources within the community.
- Staff make links with primary schools to support children in their transition.
- Staff support both parents and children in their first transition from home to pre-school.

High/Scope is delivered internationally in a variety of settings, including day care, playgroups, nursery and primary schools.

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In High/Scope settings staff and parents work together to promote the education and care of young children through parent visits, home visits by staff, active learning workshops, information leaflets and the sharing of child observation and assessment records. Ireland's involvement in High/Scope – through Barnardos – began in the mid-1980s. In 1989 High/Scope Ireland decided to employ Ireland's first High/Scope trainer.

There are currently 40 registered trainers on the High/Scope Ireland Trainer Register.

## **6.2.3 Outcomes**

Research studies suggest that children who experience the High/Scope curriculum show greater social responsibility, earn more, have greater economic status and achieve more educationally. A report of the proceedings of the High/Scope Ireland conference (2004) cited research that demonstrates other long-term benefits for High/Scope participants including increased literacy rates, school success and employability as well as decreased levels of substance misuse, delinquent and criminal activity and teenage pregnancy.

## **6.2.4 Observations on practice and learning arising for the development of the template/model**

A major strength of High/Scope is that it is a holistic approach to development, giving equal importance to cognitive, emotional, physical and social development. It actively welcomes, encourages and involves parents in the education of young children and by doing so it provides a consistent, home-like learning environment where young children can engage in key activities that include creative representation, language and literacy, initiative and social relations, movement, music, classification, seriation, number, space, and time.

## **6.3 Community-based Traveller support**

In 1995 FÁS and the Northside Traveller Support Group (NTSG) agreed to run a dedicated Traveller Community Employment scheme in Priorswood. The training programme was popular, particularly with Traveller women hoping to upskill themselves and enter mainstream employment (Collins and Ward 2006).

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The Northside Partnership is strongly linked with this project in keeping with its aim to improve the quality of life of members of the local Traveller community, and to develop innovative projects and programmes that meet the specific needs of Travellers in the areas of education and training, employment and community development in partnership with local Traveller organisations.

## **6.3.1 Aim**

The aim of the Community Employment scheme is to provide education and training to Travellers in a supportive, dedicated setting, to help participants improve their skills and education and move to mainstream employment.

The existence of a dedicated community employment base provides a focal point for different service providers in the community and statutory sectors to work in partnership with Traveller representatives to build educational capacity in the community from the ground up.

## **6.3.2 Project delivery**

NTSG subsequently changed its operating name to TravAct. The project (TravAct) now employs 13 staff and has 30 trainees, is engaged in seven projects and links with eight organisations. TravAct recognises the central importance of education to the empowerment of Travellers and has invested considerable resources in this area. TravAct works in close co-operation with the visiting teacher for Travellers in the area and is part of the Furthering Traveller Participation in Education Consortium, which is led by the Partnership. If appropriate, TravAct staff will make the initial contact with a Traveller family in need of educational support, and encourage the family to engage with the visiting teacher, school staff or other appropriate service to allay any fears.

There are a number of different supports in place in Priorswood to welcome and support Traveller children into local schools. What is noteworthy is that the local primary schools, home-school liaison/visiting teachers, community groups, Traveller parents and activists are all working together in an effective and highly co-ordinated manner to

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achieve educational involvement and attainment objectives.

The local primary schools have gone to the UK to source Traveller-referenced textbooks. Traveller culture is visible and celebrated in local primary schools.

Young children from the Traveller and settled communities have visited each other's homes. TravAct, together with local schools has established homework clubs, after-school clubs and literacy training for parents and advocated amongst the Traveller community as to the importance of education.

## **6.3.3 Outcomes**

The outcomes of this approach have been researched and documented (Collins and Ward 2006) and it is evident that while more needs to be done, Traveller families in the Coolock area have an increasingly positive attitude towards education and Traveller children are staying in education for much longer periods than the previous generation.

## **6.3.4 Observations on practice and learning arising for the development of the template/model**

The TravAct project is an excellent example of what can be done when different support services and Travellers move beyond institutional boundaries and focus on educational needs in a culturally respectful, inclusive manner. It has to be noted that this project and the level of community support for it are exceptional and not typical of Traveller initiatives generally. There is a long history of both Traveller and community activists championing Traveller-informed and -referenced education in the area.

Any attempts to replicate this project would need to bear in mind the need to develop trust between key stakeholders from the outset. It should also be noted that however successful the project, male Traveller participation is an issue. Educational and parenting development

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activities are almost exclusively engaged in by women and considerable work will need to be done to find a mechanism that will encourage and support Traveller men to engage in community education and advocacy.

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## 6.4 Lifestart

Lifestart is a home-based educational and family support programme that was established in the West of Ireland in 1989 and operates throughout the island of Ireland and in Europe. It is offered to any parent with a child aged 0-5, regardless of socio-economic, educational or other background factors.

There are eleven Lifestart projects in the Republic of Ireland, which are formally contracted and affiliated to the Lifestart Foundation through the National Office in Sligo. Projects enter a contract and affiliation agreement with the Lifestart Foundation to use its materials.

### 6.4.1 Aims

The aims of Lifestart are:

- To empower, encourage and educate fathers, mothers and others who parent in the holistic development of children with particular emphasis on the newborn to five-year age group
- To raise awareness of parenting as crucial in the development of community.

### 6.4.2 Programme delivery

Lifestart materials are based on a curriculum called 'The Growing Child' developed in the United States by Dunn and Hargitt. Its content is prepared by child development experts and covers the first five years of growth. These materials have been adapted for different cultural contexts, including Irish settings. Trained family visitors, who are employed by local projects, deliver this age-appropriate material on child development and parenting in the home.

Different projects have different delivery arrangements. Home visitors are usually (but not always) parents. In some areas, FÁS Community Employment participants deliver Lifestart. The selection process for potential family visitors is very important. Family visitors receive training of approximately three months prior to conducting home visits and training is ongoing.

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Families are recruited in various ways including door-to-door, word of mouth and referral. Visits take place on a monthly basis and are provided for the first five years of a child's life. Lifestart also facilitates group work sessions with parents, which focus on areas like the value of play, stories and consistency of parent behaviour.

## **6.4.3 Outcomes**

Queen's University Belfast is currently evaluating Lifestart in Ireland. Three main outcome areas will be examined:

- Parent development – is there an increase in parental competence and confidence and how does the programme influence the way they interact with their children?
- Child development – how does the programme influence the child's development and improve their childhood experience and outcomes?
- Community development – how does the interaction between participating parents impact on collective actions in the community and make it a better place in which to bring up children?

## **6.4.4 Observations on practice and learning arising for the development of the template/model**

This approach has a number of strengths. It is firmly focused on the early years of life and on the family in a community setting. The provision of support over the full five-year period is also commendable. Information is presented in a parent-friendly fashion mirroring the stages of development, much like the approach of community mothers.

Some reservations can be raised about the door-to-door recruitment of parents as a strategy as it can be 'hit and miss,' resource-intensive and possibly perceived as intrusive. Having said that, many Lifestart projects find this a satisfactory way of engaging families, particularly in rural areas where isolation is an issue.

The appropriateness of Community Employment as a vehicle for providing family visitors may need to be examined.

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Given the style of the relationship, it might be better that visitors would be parents themselves as they would automatically have greater reserves of experience to draw from.

## **7. Area Partnership parents' perspectives and needs**

This Chapter explores the perspectives of local parents and provides further material to inform the development of a template.

As noted in the methodology chapter, a number of focus groups, which included harder-to-reach parents, were held as part of the research for this report. The purpose of these consultations was to identify the needs of parents of young children so that interventions could be informed accordingly.

### **7.1 Perceived benefits of family involvement interventions**

Most of the parents had experienced some form of family involvement process mediated locally by their Partnership Company or another local body. All were very positive about such programmes and listed the following benefits:

- Helping them to listen to and respect their children's needs
- Helping them to use positive parenting approaches
- Helping them to play more with their children
- Helping them to learn from and support other parents
- Improved confidence, self esteem and motivation
- Enhanced social skills
- Helping them to verbalise their needs and communicate better with schools
- Helping parents with the transition to primary school.

### **7.2 The issues**

Most of the issues raised fall under the headings of confidence, commitment and communication. These are discussed in turn below.

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## **7.2.1 Personal and educational confidence**

The issue of confidence was raised in all focus groups. Parents stressed that it can be very difficult to engage with schools if they cannot read or write or had a negative experience of education. In such instances it is important that the school reaches out to the parent, making the effort to contact them personally or through a mediator in the community. Many parents reported losing confidence and adult social networks after being outside of the workforce for long periods.

Involvement in parent activities had brought them into contact with other parents, which gave them the opportunities to share ideas, discuss their children's development and other parenting issues and by doing so support one another, breaking down the sense of isolation that can build up.

## **7.2.2 Commitment**

Women in the Traveller group were very happy with local arrangements but conscious that the commitment in their area was exceptional – built on good relationships between local schools, visiting teachers and community groups – and that Travellers were not well integrated in other areas. They also noted that even though Travellers (women much more so than men) generally place a much higher value on education than in the past, it can be difficult to motivate Traveller children to stay in education because they believe that they don't have the same chance of securing a job as settled people. Thus the vast majority of Traveller children do not progress beyond Junior Certificate level and many who would be interested in a trade apprenticeship do not because of perceived and actual difficulties securing an employer sponsor.

Secondary schooling is generally more challenging for Traveller families because of small numbers of Traveller children in attendance, the lack of a family tradition of attending second-level education and because the schools generally are not as well accommodated to Traveller families as the better primary schools.

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## 7.3 Quality of communication with schools

A number of the parents found schools difficult to communicate with – sometimes because of their own history and sometimes because the school was not perceived to be welcoming or respectful of parents. Parents reported not feeling encouraged to enter the school and feeling reluctant to enter the premises. They reported sensing that they are expected to just drop their children and depart.

Participants noted that personal contact with schools tended to be motivated by negative rather than positive news. It was agreed that some parents can be confrontational with teachers on the subject of their children and that tensions can exist. Other communication difficulties centred on information which was not always provided in a user-friendly or timely fashion.

## 7.4 Parents' needs

Parents' needs as reported by the focus groups are largely around communication and involvement and can be summarised as follows:

- To be kept informed about positive as well as negative news about their children – there was a perception that parents mainly interact with the school when there is a poor report about their child
- To feel that teachers are approachable and not to be afraid of school and the teachers
- To be gently drawn into the school and welcomed into corridors, e.g. to see displays of children's work and not always to be asked for money
- Childcare needs to be facilitated, as it is difficult to get involved if parents have younger babies and toddlers to attend.
- Recognition of time restrictions – if parents are working outside the home it is difficult to engage or involve them unless schools are prepared to meet parents in the evenings or at weekends.
- Encouragement – some parents are afraid of the school and some do not see it as their job to get involved – schools need to make it clear that it is their job to reach out to reluctant or fearful parents.

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- Coffee mornings to encourage people to participate and get involved.
- Courses, e.g. parenting, computers, etc.

There was strong agreement across all focus groups that there is a need to help parents to learn about the school system and how to communicate most effectively with teachers, and for teachers to receive training in how to communicate with parents. Other suggestions to encourage parents who might be resistant or fearful of the school system included:

- Open evenings/sessions for parents
- School newsletters, telephone updates
- Information booklets for parents and children
- Displays of work and activities outside classroom doors
- Sending home little notes or records of progress or news
- Actively seeking to build strong links between learning at home and school, particularly in the junior and senior infant classes
- Folders – family photos, etc.
- Drawing the community into the school more, e.g. parents talking about their work, (nurses, firefighters, Gardaí etc.) and HSE doing talks on dental health etc.
- Acknowledging and addressing the funding/money tensions – e.g. there is a perception that schools always seem to be looking for money and many parents shy away from this
- Bring in more active learning and choice and planning that involves the children in the learning process.

There is a strong need to address and celebrate different forms of diversity including Traveller culture, one-parent and single-sex families, asylum-seekers and different cultures in Irish schools. Parents of older children reported that bullying, particularly on the basis of perceived homosexuality, is pervasive in the schoolyard.

Parents were very positive about existing measures to increase inter-parent and parent-school contact for example, parent rooms and school-based parent courses, and contact with the Home-School Liaison Service. Home visits were seen as very valuable, particularly for parents who might have been intimidated by schools.

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Working with school principals was seen as important by Traveller parents and would probably also be important for other less visible groups or cultures. Including Traveller culture in classroom materials was seen as an important ingredient in building a relationship between Travellers and schools, as was the visiting teacher scheme and particularly how it is practised in Priorswood, where there is a genuine interest in maintaining a long-term relationship with Travellers. Breakfast clubs and after-school clubs were also found to be helpful for those families who did not have a strong educational tradition.

Finally, all participants were very positively disposed towards parent involvement. The groups were clear that fostering genuine parent involvement is reliant on respectful two-way consultation while also involving the community.

## **8 Conclusions – towards a template for a parent involvement programme**

This chapter explores the implications of the research on family involvement and summarises the key learning points with a view to informing the development of a template.

It should be noted that the educational gains reported in some of the more rigorous studies are probably more ‘modest’ than policy developers might anticipate. To some extent this is a function of measurement restrictions (see 2.2 methodology). Other issues are also implicated, however. Our funding culture, together with human nature, can cause promoters to overstate the expected benefits of what often are modest programmes in the context of the levels and types of exclusion being experienced. If expectations are unrealistic, gains that are made may be undervalued instead of being celebrated. As we move into a new funding period, perhaps it is time to reflect on how we measure and *interpret* educational progress, as it is clear that impacting on those who are most at risk requires intensive, ongoing and consistent social, emotional, educational and economic supports in the home, school and community to effect meaningful change.

In the next section, the limitations of current structures are discussed before going on to outline the principles and practices that might underpin more integrated and family-centred ways of working.

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## **8.1 Limitations of current structures and approaches**

There are a number of different Irish projects addressing family involvement locally and different national programmes also contain family involvement elements. Provision is limited, however, and generally focused on areas classed 'disadvantaged'. There is no system for early (i.e. the first five years) identification of families at risk of educational or social isolation, however there are structures through which preventative and support programmes could be mediated (assuming additional resources were made available) the community-based public health service being a case in point.

The traditional separation of health, social and education services means that the cross-cutting family support needs in the areas of health, education and social competence are unlikely to be responded to under current arrangements.

This is further complicated by the fact that Ireland has no universal childcare provision system for children under five, meaning that the need for appropriate developmental stimulation is unlikely to be responded to until the most important years of life have already been negotiated.

If, however, cross-agency systems were developed that provided a mechanism for those who develop relationships with new parents (such as public health nurses or community mothers) to alert other appropriate providers in the community of the need for continuing support, agencies could then engage in effective early intervention or preventative work with families. Good co-ordination is critical and there is an obvious role for Partnership companies in facilitating such arrangements. While the benefits of a systemic approach are obvious, inter-agency work can be difficult, and give rise to inefficiencies and lacunae if implementation arrangements/relationships are weak. The challenge for Pobal and the Partnerships is to develop ways of inter-agency working that transcend organisational boundaries so that the promise of integrated approaches can be delivered on.

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## **8.2 Improving relationships with families**

There is no shortage of suggestions for improving the nature and quality of family involvement. It is important to note, however, that there is no one best way to effectively engage all parents in the achievement of their children. Each school and its community will have to develop, test and refine their own strategies informed by what is known about effective programmes. That said, effective programmes have a number of common features. Fruchter, Galletta and White (1992) examined 18 parental involvement programmes for commonalities and found the following good practice characteristics:

- Strong commitment to involve low-income and disadvantaged parents in activities to improve student achievement
- Origins and sponsorship by external institutions, including evaluation
- Significant public sector and private sector support
- Commitment to reduce the gap between home and school cultures.

While no one model of family involvement has surfaced from the material reviewed here, elements of good practice – mediated by clear philosophical principles and supported by structural, strategic and practical factors – have clearly emerged, which can form a template to shape the development of appropriate approaches. These principles are consistent with parents' needs as expressed in the literature and at the focus group sessions.

What is being proposed is less prescriptive than a model but contains strong guiding principles, processes and practices to inform different effective approaches at local level.

## **8.3 Philosophical and strategic principles underpinning effective involvement programmes**

Intervention programmes need to become more systemic and view children as nested in families, which are part of wider social networks including childcare, neighbourhoods, school and the world of work.

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By implication, interventions should be designed with the child (as distinct from the institution) at the centre. Efforts and activities need to be multi-faceted in nature, designed to mobilise supportive parallel resources in the family, school, community and the economic/work arena through partnership.

Such interventions need to be positive in orientation and shift from labelling individuals, schools and communities as 'disadvantaged' towards approaches that recognise the inherent strengths of families and communities. This is not to deny the reality of economic and social exclusion and its consequences, but to ensure that such a reductive and all-encompassing definition does not become self-fulfilling. A more positive and systemic emphasis is concerned with building social capital through positive role models, participation – particularly of those who are more difficult to reach – and empowering activities that enable the development of family and social supports, including emotional health and citizenship.

The work of Rutter makes the value of such an approach clear. The development of structures and processes that enhance protective factors (e.g. self-efficacy, personal responsibility, good social supports of children and parents etc - see 3.2) can be profoundly preventative in the case of at-risk children and have considerable benefit for society generally. A practical and successful example of such an approach is the holistic Nurturing Programme delivered through the home-school links service in the UK (see 4.6).

## **8.4 Structural processes**

Work may need to be done with institutions to help overcome territory and boundary type issues so that better alignment of resources and collaboration arrangements between different actors is possible.

A module on parent involvement needs to be introduced to all training courses for student teachers and childcare workers and revisited at in-service training sessions. This module should address the different levels and types of family involvement, the importance of prioritising family needs over institutional agendas, how to welcome and validate families and communicate in a consultative and collaborative way.

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## 8.5 Supportive Practices

There is a strong positive relationship between education, personal confidence, social class and parental involvement. In addition, the more academically successful a child, the greater the extent of parental involvement. Thus, there is a strong rationale for interventions to be targeted on those who are hard to reach or whose children are perceived to be at risk of educational underachievement. The commitment required of schools and other providers is considerable because such families usually wait for an approach rather than seeking help. Practices that reach out and build trusting relationships through home visits conducted by the Home-School Community Liaison Service and others are therefore important. These need to be complemented by a more active approach by schools to welcome, engage and consult with families beyond the school gates and disciplinary matters, however.

The characteristics of effective programmes all suggest a strong commitment on the part of school staff. Community support and valuing diversity are manifestations of this commitment. The initiative must come from the school, however. Unless schools actively and consistently reach out – particularly to families who are harder to engage – involvement will be limited to those with better means and prospects.

Practices that model respect for families, create a welcoming climate and empower learning and positive parenting in the home have been shown to be effective in enhancing parental involvement and/or children's educational achievements.

Finally, intervention programmes need to be well-funded, intensive in nature and externally evaluated. Those that focus on enhancing parenting 'at home' appear to have stronger impacts than other forms of parental involvement. This means devising (usually in co-operation with a professional provider) a high home learning environment with a strong emphasis on activities such as reading, library visits, playing with letters, shapes, and numbers, etc.

High learning environments have a greater impact on children's cognitive development than socio-economic status and are thus of particular interest in the context of hard-to-reach families/children at risk.

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The principles and practices that support family involvement with education are presented in the parental involvement template below. The template is modelled on a collaborative approach between different stakeholders and will hopefully guide and support the development of family involvement programmes that are grounded in research and effective practice.

## **TEMPLATE FOR INFORMING APPROACHES TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PRINCIPLES**

- Recognise the importance of the first five years of life and early intervention.
- Prioritise the child, e.g. needs, family circumstances, etc.
- Recognise that the educator's expectations can positively or negatively shape learning behaviour and achievement (see 4.1).
- Have a positive view of families and communities (see 4.1).
- Appreciate the importance of conceptualising and intervening systemically (see 3.1).
- View families, schools and communities as equal partners.
- Prioritise 'at risk' families (see 3.2 and 3.6).
- Recognise that interventions for 'at risk' families should be well funded and intensive in nature (high levels of frequent contact – see 4.2).
- Emphasise prevention, particularly through cultivating protective measures and community assets (see 3.2).
- Recognise the importance of independent evaluation.
- Commit to involving parents who might be resistant or fearful of school systems (see 3.6).
- Commit to supporting teachers to develop strategies to encourage family involvement and learning (see 4.3).
- Foster trust and collaboration among key representatives in different (community, school, health, social) systems.
- Support the development of high learning environments in the home (see 3.5).
- Commit to building social capital in communities.

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## **PRACTICES**

- Consult widely – including with families – to develop a written policy on family involvement (see 4.3.3).
- Welcome families and demonstrate this in the access and communication policies and practices of crèches, schools and staff.
- Establish a dedicated parent/community room within schools.
- Communicate informally, frequently and positively with parents about their children.
- Use strategies to raise teacher and parent expectations of children in schools labelled disadvantaged (see 4.1).
- Actively reach out to build trusting relationships with hard-to-reach families.
- Celebrate diversity and ensure that learning materials and content are reflective of different identities, traditions and cultures.
- Fund well-designed programmes generously.
- Help parents to develop strategies and practices to support learning in the home, particularly in the pre-school and early primary periods.
- Train teachers to work with parents in a consultative fashion, as partners in education, and to collaborate with other relevant providers in the community.
- Deliver programmes to address parents' basic educational needs in an appropriate, non-formal environment.
- Take account of the varying socio-economic circumstances and needs including transport and childcare and make provision for parents who work outside the home.

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