

**Sociolinguistic Perspectives on the Context of  
Schooling in Ireland  
Volume 2: Parent Perceptions**

**Áine Cregan**

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## Abstract

However configured, however constrained, families come with their children to school. Even when they do not come in person, families come in their children's minds and hearts and hopes and dreams. They come with their children's problems and promise. (Epstein, 2001, p.4)

While it is widely acknowledged that parents are the first and the most significant educators of the child, the complex relationship between parents and the formal institutions of education is less well understood. This paper examines the evolving role of parents as partners in their children's education, focusing particularly on social class differences in participation. This research is based on focus group discussions with parents in three schools: two schools in the School Support Programme and one mainstream school, which was conducted as part of the study that resulted in the report *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on the Context of Schooling in Ireland* (Volume 1). This paper (Volume Two) explores how parents' perceive their involvement in their children's education. Insights gained from listening to parents' voices can help to provide a relatively untapped perspective into the impact of the formal education process on those most centrally involved.

Findings from the discussions suggest that all parents value education, are anxious and willing to become involved, and feel comfortable approaching the school. Social class differences emerge in terms of the levels of communication between the school and the home, and also in relation to those out-of-school experiences that appear critical for academic success.

Recommendations are made around the role and responsibility of the institution of the school to reach out more meaningfully to parents and to support them in participating as valued partners in the education process.

**Key words:** social class, participation, cultural capital, concerted cultivation

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## 1 Introduction

(The context of the research on which this paper is based can be found in Volume One of this publication, available to download at:

[http://www.combatpoverty.ie/publications/workingpapers/2007-03\\_WP\\_TalkingPosh.pdf](http://www.combatpoverty.ie/publications/workingpapers/2007-03_WP_TalkingPosh.pdf))

The research, as evidenced in Volume One of this publication, is unequivocal in relation to the inequality in language variety experienced by children when interacting with the school system. The institution of the school is found to perpetuate this inequality through a lack of awareness of the significance of language variety for success in school; a lack of acknowledgement that certain language varieties are not inferior to others and do not imply either cognitive or linguistic deficit; a failure to teach explicitly those language skills necessary to foster success in school; and, poor or inadequate efforts to nurture an effective teacher–parent partnership approach in the education of children.

It is clear from the findings presented in Volume One of this publication that in relation to issues of language, some schools are less than adequate in supporting children from working-class backgrounds to maximise their learning potential. An important question that remains to be explored is: To what extent are parents implicated in the learning process?

This paper seeks to investigate parental involvement in children's education – its history, forms and effects – and to examine the perennial and sometimes difficult question of home–school partnership. The purpose is to explore whether and how parents can/should be required to support the school in enhancing their children's educational experience. An important perspective in this discussion is the insights gained through the focus groups with parents. The focus of the investigation is to establish best practice for both home and school so that all those interested in effective education for children can facilitate the achievement of that goal.

The paper will look first at the history of parental involvement in education, before focusing on the current consensus in relation to the forms of involvement thought to be most effective. How parental involvement varies by social class, why, and what effects this has will be considered, along with how schools can face the challenge of working with parents most productively. Parents' voices will be heard throughout the paper to further elucidate the discussion.

## **2 Parental Involvement in Schooling – A History**

Family–school relationships are socially constructed and are historically variable. (Lareau, 1987: 74)

While the institutions of the school and the family have always been connected, the degree and nature of the interaction between these two institutions has changed and developed significantly over time. Critically, it appears that with the passage of time ‘there has been a steady increase in the level of parental involvement in schooling’ (Lareau, 1987: 74). Family–school interaction has changed from a relationship where family involvement with the school was to provide food and shelter for the teacher, to where, with the rise in mass education provision, families were involved in supporting the building and maintenance of schools, to the current prevailing situation where parental involvement is defined as being ‘multifaceted in nature, because parental involvement subsumes a wide variety of parental behavioural patterns and parenting practices’ (Fan and Chen, 2001: 3).

The emphasis in the past was very much on families providing political and economic support for the institution of the school, leaving the cognitive and academic development of their children firmly in the hands of those with the professional expertise; the teachers (Lareau, 1987). More recently, however, teachers have sought parental support, requiring parents to give their children an advantageous educational environment at home; to become involved in school events; and, to support the teachers’ work (e.g. Gallup, 1985). Thus parental involvement has shifted somewhat to a current situation where many families often take on a greater and more varied role in supporting their children as the latter negotiate their way through the institution of the school (e.g. Lareau, 2000).

### **2.1 Forms of Parental Involvement**

There is a general consensus in the literature that parental involvement in schooling takes a wide range of forms. These include the following:

- **Attendance and Participation** – the extent to which parents attend and become involved in school functions
- **Involvement in the school** – volunteering assistance at the school, e.g. as a teacher aide, playground supervisor, assistant during field trips
- **Communication** – the degree and quality of communication between the school and the parents, the parents and the school, and between parents and their children around the topic of school
- **Involvement in basic obligations** – provision by the parents of basic supplies needed by their children in school, along with ensuring that comfortable and appropriate facilities are provided for their children to enable them to successfully complete their homework
- **Participation in educational activities at home** – these to vary from facilitating the completion of homework, to checking to ensure that homework is done, to supervising and helping with homework. Included in this category of parental involvement is parents reading with their children; encouraging/facilitating their children's reading; tutoring their children in reading/mathematics; and, supporting their children when particular difficulties arise with school work
- **Parenting styles and parental expectations for children** – in educational terms, a category of parental involvement that has been highlighted as having a most significant impact on a child's school success (e.g. Jeynes, 2003, 2005; Epstein, 1986; Izzo and Weisberg, 1999; Lareau, 1987, 2003; West *et al.*, 1998).

## 2.2 Effects of Parental Involvement on Children's Achievements

Studies consistently indicate that the vast majority of parents are interested in the education of their children and are anxious that their children will make as much progress as possible while in school (e.g. Lareau, 1987; West *et al.*, 1998). Lareau's findings indicated that 'all [parents] wanted their children to do well in school, and all saw themselves as supporting and helping their children achieve success in school' (Lareau, 1987: 81). It is clear also that most parents are involved in the education of their children to varying degrees, and that a

great many parents help their children to achieve success in school (e.g. Epstein, 1986).

Many studies have been conducted investigating the effects of a variety of parental involvement behaviours on the academic success of children in school. Findings from these studies tend to vary, but a consistent finding is that parental involvement is positively correlated with an increased chance of academic success in school (e.g. Christian *et al.*, 1998; Fan and Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2005; Mau, 1997; McBride and Lin, 1996; Muller, 1998) – ‘parental involvement has a significant, positive impact on children across race and across academic outcomes’ (Jeynes, 2003: 213). A study by Singh *et al.* (1995) suggests that the effects of parental involvement on academic achievement may be greater at primary than at second level. One study claims that increased parental involvement is the key to improving the academic achievement of children (Hara, 1998).

Studies have also shown that while parental involvement in their children’s education is broadly positive in its effect on the academic achievement of their children, some forms of involvement have a greater impact than others. Parental involvement characterised in terms of parents supervising their children at home (e.g. having rules about watching TV, checking homework) was found to have a weaker association with student academic achievement than parental expectations for their children’s academic attainment (Fan and Chen, 2001: 13). The effects of parental attendance and participation in school activities on academic achievement have also been found to be weaker than those of parental expectations and parenting styles (Jeynes, 2005: 262):

One definite pattern that emerged is that some of the most potent facets of parental involvement are some of the more subtle aspects of family support. Most notably parental expectations and style each demonstrated a strong relationship with scholastic outcomes. Thus, it was not particular actions such as attending school functions, establishing household rules, and checking student homework that yielded the statistically significant effect sizes. Rather, variables that reflected a general atmosphere of

involvement produced the strongest results. Parental expectations and style may create an educationally-oriented ambience, which establishes an understanding of a certain level of support and standards in the child's mind. (Jeynes, 2005: 262)

A parenting style described by Lareau (2003) as 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003: 2) points more clearly to those specific aspects of parenting style that are instrumental in achieving greater success within the school system. 'Organised activities, established and controlled by mothers and fathers, dominate the lives of middle-class children,' and 'discussions between parents and children are a hallmark of middle-class child rearing' (Lareau, 2003: 1). From this process of **concerted cultivation** springs 'a robust sense of entitlement' which 'plays an especially important role in institutional settings' (Lareau, 2003: 2).

While acknowledging that all parents want the very best for their children, Lareau (2003) recognises that those institutions with which parents must engage, e.g. school, 'firmly and decisively promote those strategies of concerted cultivation in child-rearing', leaving the parenting style of some parents 'out of synch with the standards of institutions' (Lareau, 2003: 3). These differing parenting styles appear to be connected to social class, thus promoting inequality across social classes in terms of children's chances of experiencing success in school.

### **2.3 Parental Involvement and Social Class**

Although parental involvement in schooling has increased in recent times and despite the fact that research demonstrates unequivocally that parental involvement has positive links with academic success (particularly as measured in reading scores and standardised test scores), not all parents are involved in their children's education, and many are not as involved as their children's teachers would wish (Lareau, 2000: 3). Poorer parental involvement is associated with social class. Findings in the literature indicate, for example, that:

between 40 to 60 per cent of working-class and lower-class parents fail to attend parent–teacher conferences. For middle-class parents these figures are nearly halved i.e. about 20 to 30 per cent (Lareau, 2000: 3).

Parental involvement behaviours such as promoting verbal development; reading to or with their children; taking their children on outings or to the library; making complaints about the school to the school personnel; attendance at functions in, or organised by, the school are all more frequently manifested by middle-class parents than by their working-class counterparts (e.g. Baker and Stevenson, 1986; Heath, 1983; Heyns, 1978; Medrich *et al.*, 1982; Stevenson and Baker, 1987; Wilcox, 1978).

A number of reasons have been suggested as to why this is the case. Some researchers believe that the relatively low level of parental involvement of working-class or lower socio-economic status parents is associated with the **value** placed on education by parents. Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (1987) believe that:

higher SES (socio-economic status) parents, realising the importance of education and feeling confident of their right to be involved in the school, may take a more active role than their lower SES counterparts in supporting school programmes (in Lareau, 2000: 6).

There is a clear, if unsupported, assumption in this statement that lower socio-economic status parents do not realise the importance of education for their children.

Another explanation for the differing levels of parental involvement by social class attributes these differences to the **institution of the school**, such as variation in terms of the quantity and quality of interaction and that the demands made by different schools and teachers engenders different levels of response from families. Connell *et al.* (1982), for example, talk about working-class parents feeling alienated or ‘frozen out’ when interacting with teachers.

Other studies found that these families feel less comfortable or welcome in the school setting than is the case for middle-class parents (e.g. Lightfoot, 1978; Ogbu, 1974). The extent to which parents are invited by the school to become involved may vary from one situation to another, although Lareau (2000) found no difference in terms of the amount and types of request for parental involvement made by teachers of parents across social class.

Yet another explanation put forward to explain patterns of parental involvement in schooling draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, invoking the concept of 'cultural capital'. Bourdieu contends that educational systems 'universally impose the same demands without any concern for universally distributing the means for satisfying them' (2000: 76). This perspective argues that 'schools draw unevenly on the social and cultural resources of members of the society' (Lareau, 1987: 74). Because schools use the linguistic structures, authority patterns, and curricula of the dominant culture (i.e. that of the middle and upper classes), there is a natural alignment between middle-class families and the culture of the school. This makes it possible for such families to interact with the institution of the school more easily and effectively than it is for families whose 'cultural capital' differs from that of the dominant group. As a result, 'individuals, families and classes dispose unevenly of the kind of cultural capital necessary to invest in acquiring educational and social success' (de Carvalho, 2001: 23).

Findings from a study by Lareau (2000) suggest that this uneven distribution of the necessary resources required to interact effectively with the institution of the school is most evident in terms of:

- Education
- Occupational status
- Dimensions of work
- Class, networks and information (Lareau, 2000: 116).

### **2.3.1 Education**

The level of education achieved by some working-class parents may be lower than that of many middle-class parents, so linguistic knowledge and content

knowledge of parents may vary across social class. Levels of educational competence may make it more difficult for working-class parents to interact effectively with teachers, to participate successfully in school-based initiatives aimed at supporting their children's learning, or to help their children with their homework. In Lareau's (2000) study, parents were aware of their limited educational competence and consequently lacked confidence in their ability to meaningfully support their children's learning. This is increasingly the case as the children progress through the school, resulting in decreased parental involvement in children's education as the children get older (Epstein, 1986).

### **2.3.2 Occupational Status**

Many of the working-class parents in Lareau's (2000) study were employed in either skilled or semi-skilled occupations. Consequently, their occupational status was lower than that of the teachers with whom they were interacting. This was typically not the case for middle-class parents whose occupational status was often of either equal or superior prestige to that of their children's teachers. The effect of this on parental involvement was that working-class parents viewed teachers as professionals who have a specialised body of knowledge that enables them to teach their children effectively – 'perceiving teachers as professional and themselves as educationally incompetent ... they [working-class parents] readily assigned responsibility for their children's education to the teacher' (Lareau, 2000: 111).

Other effects of their relatively low educational and occupation status vis-à-vis the teachers were that working-class parents were less inclined to challenge the system or make demands of the school, believing instead in the capacity of teachers as professionals to be self-regulating. On the other hand, middle-class parents, viewing themselves as equals or superior, were less inclined to defer to teachers and were more active in engaging with the institution of the school to ensure the best experience for their children.

### **2.3.3 Dimensions of Work**

There was a much clearer home/work divide among the working-class parents in Lareau's (2000) study. The separation between work (which was done on site and never brought into the home setting) and home was replayed in terms of the home–school relationship where parents viewed their children's education as something that took place on the school site, with relatively little involvement from the home setting. Middle-class parents, whose work often spilled into the home setting, viewed the home–school relationship as being much more connected and were of the view that both school and home were involved in the successful education of their children. Lack of flexibility on the work site also made it more difficult for working-class parents to attend at the school when necessary, thus reducing their capacity to become involved in their children's education.

### **2.3.4 Class, Networks and Information**

The middle-class parents in Lareau's (2000) study had many informal ties with education, resulting in these parents having access to information about schooling from a wide variety of sources. The working-class parents, however, were much more dependent on the school and the teachers for sourcing necessary, relevant information. This had implications when, for example, children were in need of extra support and the parents were less informed about the range of choices available to them in accessing such support.

Thus, the effect of the uneven distribution of resources required to interact with the school system is such that:

educational policy sets one agenda for all families – specifically about how families can contribute to the curricular goals and their children's school success – disregarding prior diversity of class and culture, the differentiated cultural capital which is the currency of school success. In this way, educational policy subordinates families to schools by clearly setting the educational agenda and assigning parents the job of teacher-aide (de Carvalho, 2001: 24).

de Carvalho (2001) asks, 'to what extent should [a] public school depend on families and parents playing a particular role' (de Carvalho, 2001: 26) and wonders whether it is possible and reasonable 'to turn all families ... into efficient mediators of their children's school success?' (de Carvalho, 2001: 25). She argues that families and schools are 'distinct institutions situated in different spaces and times of everyday life ... responding to different social and individual needs' (de Carvalho, 2001: 41). Consequently, 'problematizing the family' (de Carvalho, 2001: 35) where children are not succeeding as well as they might in the context of the school is unhelpful.

A similar view of the difficulties experienced by working-class children in the school system is presented by Reay (2001), who talks of the pathologisation of working-class childhood through schooling 'by representing the children of the poor only as a measure of what they lack' (Reay, 2001: 335). Reay (2001) further contends that 'the lack of positive images of the working classes contributes to them being educationally disqualified and inadequately supported academically' (Reay, 2001: 335). In terms of parental involvement in education, de Carvalho (2001) develops this perspective, arguing that 'the path to educational equity ... depends on educational policies and practices assuming *explicitly* that the school adopts the dominant culture, and that many students lack the required cultural resources to succeed in it' (de Carvalho, 2001: 23).

It is clear that the amount and quality of parental involvement in children's schooling is varied. With a view to maximising the effectiveness of a child's school experience the consensus of an overwhelming body of research on parental involvement focuses on how schools can help families so that families can help schools to educate their children, while policy in relation to this question has shifted from a delegation model to a partnership model.

## 2.4 Promoting a Partnership Approach

A wide body of research has found that parental involvement is positively related to academic achievement across race and culture (e.g. Fan and Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2005; Izzo and Weissberg, 1999; West *et al.*, 1998). It is, therefore, useful to examine findings in relation to how parental involvement can be mobilised to greatest effect. A meta-analysis of the relation of parental involvement to urban elementary-school-student academic achievement looked at the influence that school programmes on parental involvement had on student achievement (Jeynes, 2003). Findings from this meta-analysis showed that parental expectations for their children's success in school yielded the strongest relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. Parents reading with their children was also found to be significantly related to achievement, as was communication between the parents and their children.

School programmes aimed at encouraging parental support in children's schooling were found to be positively related to achievement. Jeynes (2005) claims that this finding is important because it indicates that 'parental involvement may represent an important means of raising the educational outcomes of struggling urban students specifically' (Jeynes, 2005: 261). Citing the claim by teachers that reaching out to parents in working-class situations is futile because parents either will not or cannot become involved, Jeynes (2005) argues that these findings 'point to the benefits of teachers encouraging a higher level of parental participation in their children's education' (Jeynes, 2005: 361).

Epstein (1986) found that not only do children benefit from increased participation by their parents in their education, but that many parents are anxious and willing to become more involved, with significant numbers needing support to empower them to do so. Epstein's study reported that 80 per cent of the parents involved would be willing to spend more time working with their children at home if they were given specific direction in relation to what to do. Where teachers used parental involvement practices, instructing parents on how best to support their children's learning at home, the study found an

improvement in the children's academic success. While parental participation was reduced as the children progressed through the grade levels, where it did take place all the children benefited, even at the higher grade levels, and all the parents expressed a high degree of satisfaction at being more aware of what was being taught in school.

Some important and interesting findings emerged from Epstein's study:

- Parents believed that the schools could do more to involve them in learning activities to help their children at home
- Fewer and fewer teachers helped the parents to become involved as the students advanced through the elementary grades
- Parents responded positively to the teachers' efforts to involve them in learning activities at home
- Despite differences in the parents' feelings about their ability to help, most parents did help (Epstein, 1986: 290, 291).

Epstein (1986) also identified the need to build confidence, particularly among the parents of children in the upper grades. It is important for these reasons that parent programmes designed to maximise participation of all parents would be developed. Successful programmes are characterised by the following basic features:

- Clear objectives of short- or long-term activities
- Clear instructions
- Indicators of how the parent activity complements the teacher's programme of work
- Procedures to facilitate the parent-teacher contact when necessary
- Systematic follow-up of the parent efforts
- Opportunities for the parents to contribute to the process (Epstein, 1986: 292).

## 2.5 Partnership in an Irish Context

In *Parents as Partners in Schooling*, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (1997) articulated the benefits for all stakeholders of working in partnership: '... if the young are to be educated to play their full role in society, and if their parents are to be given a chance to continue learning, partnership is the only way forward' (OECD, 1997: 57). These benefits have been recognised in Ireland for some time. The most significant response to the acknowledged need for partnership was the establishment in 1990 of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme.

Based upon a Freirean (1970) philosophy that 'transformation is only relevant if it is carried out with the people, not for them' (Freirean, 1970: 43), the HSCL scheme was designed to reduce the negative effects of education disadvantage by ensuring that 'parents have a voice in the exercise of power in the school' (Mulkerrins, 2007: 133). Among the stated aims of the scheme is 'to raise awareness in parents of their own capacities to enhance their children's educational progress and to assist them in developing relevant skills' (Department of Education and Science, 2002: 2).

Reviews of the scheme have suggested that a consequence of participating in the scheme was that the parents' self-confidence increased; that they were more aware of what was happening in the school; and, that they had learned how to help their children with their homework (Ryan, 1999; Conaty, 2002). The most recent review found that the greatest impact of the scheme on parents has been 'the extent to which parents feel less threatened by school and teachers' (Archer and Shortt, 2003: 82). This review also found 'more moderate, but still substantial, impact [on parents] in relation to helping with school activities, learning new parenting skills, and involvement in children's schoolwork' (Archer and Shortt, 2003: 82).

When interpreting these findings, however, it is important to bear in mind that the parents were not involved in the design, management, planning or the development of the HSCL scheme, a scheme which, since its inception, has been managed exclusively by the Department of Education and Science, nor

were parents included in the 2003 review of the scheme (Mulkerrins, 2007). The findings, which were presented in relation to parents, were the perceptions of co-ordinators and principals in schools where the HSCL scheme operated.

Findings from another small-scale study (Mulkerrins, 2007) that asked parents for their views on the HSCL scheme indicated that parents very much valued their involvement in the scheme and as a consequence were no longer fearful of approaching the school. This study also reported, however, that a majority of parents felt 'uninvolved, under-represented and powerless' in the decision-making process of the school, and all parents cited a lack of consultation by the school meant that their voices were not heard in relation to 'the operation of the school or the educational process' (Mulkerrins, 2007: 142).

Lareau (2000) defines partnership as '... a relationship between equals where power and control is evenly distributed' (Lareau, 2000: 35). Higgins (2007) highlights the complexities for schools and parents in overcoming barriers to partnership, particularly where blame for underachievement is located 'solely outside the school context' (Higgins, 2007: 120).

The study reported in this paper sought to enlist parents' views on participation and partnership. A description of this process and its findings follows.

### 3 Description of Study

During the data collection phase of the study *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on the Context of Schooling in Ireland*, focus group discussions were undertaken with parents in three of the four schools that participated in the study. In the case of the fourth school, a rural school, the principal felt that it would be quite unwieldy to facilitate such a discussion with the parents and so the idea was not pursued in that school. Two of the schools that participated in the parent group discussions were urban schools in the School Support Programme (DES, 2005), referred to as status 1 schools, and the third was a school in a middle-class urban context, referred to as a status 2 school.

In each school approximately 12 randomly selected pupils (four pupils from senior infants, third class and sixth class respectively) participated in the study. Parents from this cohort in each school were contacted. Those available and willing to participate were invited to a focus group discussion, which in all cases took place in the school. The discussions were scheduled for the last hour of the school day. Four parents from one status 1 school and three parents from the other attended, and three parents from the status 2 school attended. In all cases both mothers and fathers were represented, although overall there were more mothers than fathers.

Parents were told that the purpose of the study was to explore how to maximise their children's educational experience in the context of examining how the school and the parents could contribute to the process, with particular reference to the development of their children's language skills. It was emphasised that hearing parents' views on the question was of particular interest in the study. (Questions that formed the focus of the discussion are presented in the Appendix).

After an introductory phase the discussion took place and parents were comfortable and very willing to share their views. Parent perspectives on the issues discussed generated very valuable and interesting insights on

perceptions in relation to parental participation in the educational process. Their responses are presented in the next section.

### **3.1 Parent Responses**

Possibly the most interesting finding that emerged from the focus group discussions was the remarkable degree of similarity in the responses provided by the parents across the different social contexts. It was manifestly evident that, in line with findings in the research, and in particular findings reported by O'Neill (O'Neill, 1992: 95), all of these parents were united in their concern about, and interest in, their children's education. All the parents were anxious that their children achieve their potential and succeed as well as possible. No parent indicated otherwise in the course of the discussions.

The overwhelming majority of the parents indicated that they were more involved (some much more involved) in their children's education than had been the case with their parents, indicating an increase in parental involvement in recent times. Those who suggested high levels of involvement in their own education by their parents were very young parents.

### **3.2 Forms of Participation**

All of the parents indicated that they are 'involved' in their children's education. The form of that involvement in the status 1 schools - schools in the School Support Programme (DES, 2005) as presented by the parents in the study was as follows:

- Ensure that the homework is done (this varied from supervising homework as it is being done to checking that homework is completed)
- Provide appropriate structure for homework to be done (e.g. table to do homework)
- Attend at the school for parent-teacher meetings (once or twice a year)
- Attend Parents' Council meetings – focused mainly on fund-raising for the school

- Attend at the school in the event of a child having a behavioural or social problem (e.g. experiencing bullying).

In talking about their purpose in attending the school, parents from the status 1 schools were very much inclined to drift into conversations among themselves about how well their children got on with their teachers and other children in their class. They were much more focused on attendance at school to deal with non-academic issues. This finding is in line with that of O'Neill's (1992) study, where more than half of the parents had been to the school to deal with aspects of their children's behaviour, and there was no mention of the parents attending the school for any other reason (O'Neill, 1992: 95).

In this study, only one parent indicated having participated in a school-run programme to support a child's learning (Maths for Fun Programme). Only one parent mentioned coming in to the school to 'talk about a lesson he did not understand/homework I didn't understand'. This attendance at the school was instigated by the parent herself in response to her perceived need for support from the teacher in scaffolding her child's learning. In this case the teacher supported the parent in relation to how best she could help the child at home. One father indicated that he would come in to the school often, but when pressed for the purpose of these visits said 'off-hand now I can't think, but I do come in regularly'.

In the status 2 school (school set in middle-class context), one parent indicated her belief that 'parents are a resource which can be used by the school' and, comparing her experiences of home-school interaction in an American context, suggested that this resource is under-utilised in Irish primary schools. Another parent in this school represented her current form of involvement as 'to supervise homework'. A third parent in this school, a father, did not know where his son's classroom was. This parent suggested that the mother was the more active parent in promoting their child's education.

Clearly the **form and degree of involvement varied quite a bit in both social contexts**. Parents in the status 1 schools appeared much more concerned with

non-academic issues, while parents in the status 2 school varied from not being particularly involved, to wishing that parents could be further utilised as a resource in their child's school experience.

### **3.3 Defining Roles**

All parents readily accepted that they have a role to play in supporting the teacher in their child's learning. One mother in a status 1 school vehemently commented that the child's education 'is your responsibility, not just the teacher's' and strongly expressed the view that the parent and the teacher should co-operate, adding that 'it's nice to be able to be on a par with the teacher'. When asked to elaborate on the form that role should take, however, the parents were less clear – 'When you have more than one child, it's actually very hard to do it, as much as you'd want to be able to do it' (status 1). Another parent (status 1) viewed her role as follows: 'you should be interacting with the teacher to make sure he's behaving himself for her and that he's doing what he should be doing, learning, you know.' The father in this focus group agreed strongly with this sentiment, but when pushed to articulate a view on his role in supporting his child's education he found it difficult to expand. Another father (status 1) characterised the role of the parent as being 'to make sure they're knuckling down to it'.

A parent in the status 2 school, whose involvement was characterised as 'supervising homework', felt that she is fulfilling her role 'pretty well at the moment', and because she has a child in another school who has ADHD, she believed that she 'probably couldn't cope with any more'. The father in this focus group had little involvement with the school and viewed his role in his son's education as one where he himself is 'responsible for a great deal of the child's learning' which takes place outside of the school context. So while he readily accepted that he has a role in his child's learning, he felt confident enough to take responsibility for that role himself, and did not necessarily feel the need to support specifically what the school is doing in order to advance his child's development.

One parent in this school expressed the view that there were high expectations of her as a parent in the school to support her child's learning and that this marked a significant difference to the role her parents had in supporting her own education. In addition to a wide range of differing forms of involvement in children's schooling, it seems that **there is a marked lack of clarity around the parents' role in supporting their children's education across both social classes.**

Despite the haphazard structure surrounding the **form** of parental involvement manifested by these parents, and their confusion in relation to their **role** in supporting the teacher in educating their children, the discussion among the parents in the status 2 school revealed a great deal of incidental support for children's education across all parents, similar to the 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003) described earlier. This was evidenced by the fact that **all** of the parents in this school, as a matter of course, promote the following in their homes:

- Their children have access to lots of books both at home and in the library
- They themselves read widely
- There is much interaction for the children in the home and with extended family and friends
- Their children have rich imaginative lives (one mother explained how she regularly makes up stories for and with her child), and are interested in unusual things (one child in third class is very interested in justice issues and animal welfare, which her mother suggested derived from the mother's own interest in these issues)
- Their children have broad-based experiences of life on which to draw
- The children are facilitated to work on modern technology at home and are comfortable and familiar with modern means of communication in the home.

In contrast, parents in the status 1 schools, while acknowledging that there were some books at home, did not seem to have access to many books – one

father said that there were 33 books in his house. These parents were considerably less likely to actively expose their children to books – ‘You’d get browned off reading to her’; ‘They’d read a bit but then they want you to read to them and I’d start but then I have 101 other things to do – I got so sick of it I stopped it to be honest about it.’ Another father, while conceding that ‘I think it’s the whole secret – reading’ gave no indication of reading to his child or encouraging her to read independently in the home. Children’s reading at home is predominantly based on reading that is for homework. This concurs with the children’s own description of reading habits in the home. This is despite the fact that all of these parents read (newspapers mainly, but also magazines, novels and one mother is a member of a library), though some indicated that their reading occurs when their children are asleep.

Most of these parents, though not all, noted that their children talk a lot at home. One parent mentioned that the children are not allowed to watch TV during dinner and that she uses the time to talk about what went on in school during the day. However, when talking with the children of these parents it emerged clearly that very little, often no talking at home centres on school-related topics. Technology in most of these homes is experienced in the form of computer games which, parents ruefully agreed, takes up more of their children’s time that they would like.

It is interesting to note that in this very small sample of parents **a clear divide in terms of children’s exposure to educationally-oriented experiences is evident across social class**. There was no evidence whatsoever of a lack of interest or concern for their children among these parents, but there was a very stark difference across social class in terms of the experiences of the children in their out-of-school contexts.

### **3.4 Awareness of Academic Content of Schooling**

Epstein (1986) argued that parental involvement with learning activities in the home is one form that truly reflects the principle of home–school co-operation. The parents’ awareness of the learning going on in the classroom in the status

1 schools in this study was quite vague. In infant classrooms some level of awareness may be built up incidentally, through casual, informal conversations with the teacher when collecting the child from school. However, other parents relied predominantly, if not totally, on the homework the children were asked to complete in order to have a sense of the academic content being covered by the teacher. In line with findings from the Mulkerrins (2007) study regarding lack of consultation, some of the parents in this study felt this was not enough – ‘teachers only ever send for you if there is a problem (meaning a behavioural problem). They never send for you if the child is doing well or not doing well (meaning academically).’

The majority of these parents were not happy with the level of communication involved in one parent–teacher meetings, which occurred very early in the school year. Others, however, thought that the contact in relation to the academic development of the child through parent–teacher meetings was enough and had no concerns in this regard ‘because the teacher is lovely. The homework is in the journal so you know what you have to do’.

In contrast, the parents in the status 2 school described themselves as ‘pretty aware’ of the learning taking place in the classroom context because ‘I am told ... the teacher instigates that – there is huge communication’ (the mother of a child in an infant classroom). Other parents of older children in the school agreed that they were ‘100 per cent aware’ of what was happening in the classroom and what they needed to do to further that learning through ‘weekly notes’ indicating what the teacher was doing and what she expected the parents to do to support that learning.

When asked if they would like to have a greater awareness of the academic content of their children’s schooling, all parents in the status 1 school said that they would. One parent said she would like ‘more interaction with teachers and parents’ and another parent in the group added that she would be willing to work with the children at home, but would ‘need support from the school because we don’t know how to do it’. One father admitted that he ‘struggles

with them during homework', revealing a lack of confidence in his ability to keep up with the academic content of the homework.

A parent in the status 2 school noted that she would support the teacher more in relation to the older children's learning, but would need 'more structure and support with the older children'. This parent cited a recent experience where she discovered afterwards that the children had been studying ring forts in history and noted, 'I felt disappointed that I could have taken the child there,' making reference to a reconstruction of a ring fort in the vicinity.

Parents in the status 1 schools were very unclear in relation to the academic content of their children's schooling, but pointed out that they would like greater awareness and would be willing to support the teachers in this respect if given direction. Conversely the parents in the status 2 school were much more aware of their children's learning, but felt the need for greater communication and more support in terms of their role in relation to their older children.

There were very obvious differences in levels of awareness among the parents in relation to the academic content of their children's school experiences. These differences appeared to relate to the extent to which schools out-reached to the parents and informed them of the academic content of their classrooms, as well as in relation to their expectations of support from the parents.

- There was **strong consensus** evident among parents **across social class** of a **willingness and desire to be aware of their children's learning and to support that learning**
- **Middle-class parents** were much **more aware of the learning** going on in their children's classrooms than their working-class counterparts because teachers in the status 2 school communicated their expectations of parental support explicitly in letters home
- **All parents** articulated the view that they **would need much more support** from the schools in order to help their children meaningfully, particularly **as they progressed through the school**. All the teachers in

the study (see Volume 1 of this report) appeared reluctant to engage in greater levels of communication with the parents than currently exist, citing the significant commitment of time and effort that would be needed to do so, compounded in the case of the status 1 schools by difficulties in sustaining parental support, as the main reason for this.

### **3.5 Relationship with the School**

Despite the asymmetrical nature of the power relations between home and school for many working-class parents as presented in the literature, all of the parents in this study expressed very positive views of the schools and teachers responsible for the education of their children. A father in a status 1 school commented that ‘there is more of a relationship between parents and teachers’ now than when he was in school and as a consequence his children’s experience of school is ‘much better’ than his own. The parents talked about their children loving going to school and seeming to be ‘much happier’ in school than they were themselves. The parents noted that they felt ‘comfortable’ coming in to the school when it was necessary and that the school personnel (e.g. principal, teachers) were ‘approachable’.

In contrast with findings in O’Neill’s study (1992), no parent indicated a feeling of intimidation or alienation when coming in to the school, suggesting a significant departure from the prevailing situation a decade ago in Ireland where parents reported feeling that teachers ‘look down on them’, or ‘talked down’ to them, ‘using big words that said nothing’ (O’Neill, 1992: 96).

It was evident from the discussion, however, that the parents from the status 1 schools demonstrated considerably less confidence in their ability to support their children’s learning (e.g. the father who mentioned that he ‘struggles’ with his children’s homework as compared to the father in the status 2 school who indicated that his son ‘gets a lot of his knowledge from home’ and was satisfied that this was appropriate).

## 4 Discussion of Findings

The findings from these discussions with parents present an interesting perspective on how parents perceive themselves as agents in the education of their children. It is clear from the parent responses that **all of the parents** who participated in these discussions **are involved and interested** in their children's education and that this is the case across social class. It is also clear that while accepting that they have a role to play in the education of their children, there is much **confusion** around the form that role takes. This results in parental involvement across social class taking the form predominantly of parental supervision of homework and attendance at school functions.

All of the parents articulated the view that their involvement in their children's education waned as their children progressed through the school. Some indicated an inability to cope with the content of the curriculum as their children moved up through the school.

As identified earlier in this paper, social class differences in the forms of parental participation were manifest in issues of:

- 'Concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003);
- Communication; and,
- 'Cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 2000).

### 4.1 'Concerted Cultivation'

It would seem from the discussions that the forms of involvement that had the most significant impact on children's academic achievement in school – **parenting styles and parent expectations** – may vary across social class for these parents. The discussions with the parents in the status 2 school revealed significantly that there is 'an educationally-oriented ambience' (Jeynes, 2005: 262) in terms of parenting **style** incidentally created in their homes by virtue of their children's expansion of experience; interaction with a wide variety of

people; familiarity and ease with modern technology; and, the development of their children's imaginations and range of interests.

These children are exposed to reading, both independent reading and reading with their parents, to a much greater degree than appears to be the case for their counterparts in the status 1 schools.

It would appear also that **expectations** may vary across social class, as for the parents in the status 2 school the importance of academic success is paramount, whereas for those in the status 1 schools having a good experience in school is most important. This is evidenced from the parents in the status 1 schools who spontaneously focused their responses on their children's social experience in school, whereas parents in the status 2 school focused overwhelmingly on their children's academic development in school.

Differences in terms of parental expectations are exemplified in the example of a parent in a status 1 school who justifiably expressed pride in the fact that her older daughter had successfully 'graduated' from a second level school, while a mother of a senior infant child in the status 2 school emphasised the importance of having 'a close, personal relationship with the teacher' because it would 'help the child's learning' and that 'this is very important for the child'.

There is no evidence from this study that parents in status 1 schools are less aware than their counterparts in the status 2 school of the value of education. It is manifestly clear that **all parents**, regardless of social class, **value education** and are concerned that their children succeed.

#### **4.2 Communication**

Contrary to the findings in Lareau's (2000) study, there is evidence in the current study to support the notion that the **institution of the school varies in relation to how it interacts with these families**. While the parents from both schools indicated that they felt welcome and comfortable in approaching the school, in the case of the two status 1 schools parents indicated that the school

did not reach out sufficiently to them or involve them as much as they would wish in the education of their children. The low level of awareness of these parents in relation to the academic content of their children's school experiences was very striking. This was in stark contrast to parents in the status 2 school who predominantly were not only aware of their children's learning in school, but also were required and expected by the school to participate actively in their children's learning in support of the school. Communication between the school and the parents, the parents and the school, and among the parents and their children appeared to be very different for families in status 1 schools than those in the status 2 school.

#### **4.3 'Cultural Capital'**

It was clear also from the conversations with the parents that **the parents brought different degrees of 'cultural capital' to bear on their involvement with the schools.** In the status 1 schools the parents were very aware of their limited educational competence, particularly in relation to their children as they progressed through the school, and displayed very little confidence in their ability to support their children academically. Also, even though the parents acknowledged that they felt comfortable approaching the school, they articulated a view that they would welcome greater involvement in supporting their children's learning, thus catapulting them to a level where they (the parents) would be 'on a par with the teacher' (words of a mother in a status 1 school). In terms of occupational status, a significant number of these parents indicated that they were currently unemployed, while some parents in the status 2 schools were college graduates.

## 5 Conclusion

Children thrive when parents are involved in their schooling (Izzo and Weissberg, 1999; Jeynes, 2003). Parents **want** to be involved in their children's education (Epstein, 1986). All parents need support in facilitating children's learning and specifically in relation to how best to support that learning in the context of the home (Izzo and Weissberg, 1999: 835), particularly for older children. Some parents need more support than others because of varying degrees of 'cultural capital' being brought to an institution which functions predominantly on the basis of middle-class norms (de Carvalho, 2001).

This study points to the fact that parents are willing and anxious to participate in the education of their children. It finds additionally that some parents are less empowered to do so than others and need schools to reach out more to support them in this role. Many parents who are most in need of this support are less likely to receive it from the schools, despite the fact that the schools expect such participation from parents (see findings in Volume One of this study).

Data generated from parent insights, as presented in this study, suggest the following:

- Schools need to recognise that many parents are interested in having higher levels of involvement in their children's education than is currently the case and to tap into that resource appropriately
- Parents need clarity in relation to their role in supporting the school to enhance their children's learning
- Schools need to promote all forms of parental participation in education, but particularly those practices that have been found to link most successfully with children's academic attainment
- Parents need to take active responsibility for their children's education by putting into action those behaviours found to support their children's learning.

Such findings suggest that schools should be encouraged and enabled to reach out more successfully to parents across all social class, but particularly to those parents who most need that support. Such a partnership approach is reflected in *The Home-School Community Liaison Scheme: From Vision to Best Practice* (Department of Education and Science, 2007). Findings reported in this study and others would suggest, however, that while aspirations for a parent–teacher partnership approach are set down in documents produced by the Department of Education and Science, implementation of such aspirations falls short, at least in the schools involved in this study.

Higgins (2007) acknowledges that ‘barriers to partnership exist within the school and home’, but contends that ‘ultimately, the underlying power to harness and develop partnership rests with schools’ (Higgins, 2007: 120). It is important that attitudes in relation to the willingness and potential of parents to be successfully involved in their children’s education are reviewed by schools, recognising that ‘parents’ lack of knowledge does not mean lack of interest’ (Epstein, 1986: 292). Adequate resources need to be put in place in schools to facilitate the development of communication between the school and the home; to put support systems in place that will develop the capacity of parents to empower their children in terms of learning; and, to develop programmes designed to stimulate and maximise parental support for children.

Bearing in mind the finding that ‘teachers’ frequent use of parental involvement practices ... mitigated the disadvantages typically associated with race, social class, and grade level’ (Epstein, 1986: 289), it would seem that the rewards for such an investment could be very significant indeed.

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## **Appendix: Focus Group Discussion – Questions for Parents**

### **A. Parents' own experiences of school**

- How long
- What type of school
- How well they feel they achieved
- What their feelings in relation to school are
- Positive/negative memories
- Any regrets?
- Anything they would have changed to make things better about school
- Parental support for their time in school?
- How was their school experience different from that of their children?

### **B. Parents' Literacy Activities at Home**

- Reading habits
- Types of reading materials most frequently used
- Membership of library – convenience of library facilities
- Attitude to children's reading – support – how?
- When buying treats for children would they ever buy a book?
- Do the children see them reading/writing?
- Talk to the children – about daily family activities/school/current affairs/books that the children are reading?
- Sibling reading habits
- Grandparents' reading habits/talking with children
- Taking children on outings/special events

### **C. Literacy Resources in the Home Environment**

- Availability of materials for children to read
- Types of materials
- Quiet place to read/write
- Rules around watching tv/dvd/computer games
- Visits to/membership of library

### **D. Relationship with School**

- How often/for what purpose do they come to the school?
- Does this change as the children get older?
- How do they feel about coming into the school/talking to the teacher/principal?
- Events in the school – support – PT meetings etc.
- How aware are you of what your child is learning in school?

### **E. Ambitions/Expectations for your child**

- What are your hopes for your child as he/she grows into adulthood?
- What realistically do you see your child achieving?
- What do you think is the role of the school/teacher in helping your child achieve these goals?

### **F. Perceptions of Role in Relation to Children's Education**

- How do you prepare your child to participate in the school setting?
- What, do you think, is your role in this process?
- How important do you see your role in furthering the work of the school in relation to your child's development?
- What do you see as the role of the teacher?
- How much information have you received from the school in relation to what is happening in the classroom?
- What information would you like to receive?
- If you could change something about the school as it relates to you what would that be?