PARTNERSHIP PEDAGOGIES: FAMILY-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS IN DISADVANTAGED SETTINGS

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Abstract

Education and community are inextricably linked and their mutual reliance validates the existence of the school. Education at its best unleashes human potential and enables individuals and communities to flourish. This is best achieved when families, schools and communities work closely in partnership in the education process. Developing educational partnerships, however, is a challenging and complex endeavour. As gatekeepers in this undertaking, teachers are required to move beyond traditional teaching roles, to remain open to new ideas and experiences, and to build new alliances with parents and local communities. Such a model of teaching and learning challenges schools to become active agents of change in renewing the vitality of life within their communities. In this study, ethnographic and grounded theory approaches were employed to explore home-school-community educational partnerships in five Irish primary schools and in so doing endeavoured to construct partnership pedagogies that will help inform future policy in educationally disadvantaged settings. The study argues that a variety of benefits and outcomes for families, schools and local communities accrue from working in partnership in children's education. The range of outcomes and benefits for children and adults include academic achievement, social and personal development and capacity enhancement within the community. Family-school-community educational partnerships allow for a greater sense of ownership of the educational agenda, and this in turn generates higher levels of intrinsic motivation and a more culturally-responsive curriculum. As a consequence, families and local communities develop a closer identification with their school, resulting in enhanced social capital throughout the school community.

Acknowledgements

'As in the rain forest, a dazzling diversity of life-forms complement and sustain each other; there is a secret oxygen with which we unknowingly sustain one another' (O'Donohue, 2003:143).

During the course of this research study I became acutely aware of this 'secret oxygen' with which we sustain one another. Looking back over the past four years I am deeply conscious of the support, assistance and encouragement I received along the way from friends, colleagues and family members, without which this thesis would not have reached completion.

I wish to acknowledge the continuous support of my family (my wife Angela and my four sons Diarmuid, Michael, Colm and John) whose patience and understanding provided the space and encouragement to overcome the many obstacles life throws in the way of completing an Ed. D. thesis.

The engagement of many work colleagues in my research topic in ways that helped clarify my thinking and crystallise my conclusions must also be acknowledged; as must the technical assistance provided by certain individuals and family members.

Without the unstinting cooperation and good will of the five school communities, involved in the FSCEP project, this research study would not have been possible. I therefore wish to acknowledge the contribution of the parents, children and teachers who collaborated in the generation and analysis of data through journal keeping, interviews and focus-group sessions.

I wish to acknowledge the influence of my lecturers during my Ed. D. studies and also the supporting staff who made the 'Sheffield experience' such a rewarding and worthwhile experience. To my fellow students on the course I wish to express my thanks for the lively debates and exchange of ideas.

Finally, I wish to pay tribute to a supervisor par excellence, Professor Jon Nixon, for his unwavering support and re-assuring advice in the design and structure of this thesis. More importantly I wish to acknowledge his wisdom, friendship and loyalty in guiding my educational journey and in helping me discover some of my hidden potential as a writer and a researcher.

Table of Contents

Part 2

Part 3

Part 1

The structure of this thesis is three-fold. Part 1 deals with the contextual setting of the study, the theoretical framework and the methodological approach adopted. Part 2 presents and discusses the quantitative and qualitative data analysis and findings. Part 3 presents conclusions drawn in relation to the four core research questions of the study.

Part 1 of this thesis is composed of three chapters entitled (1) Contextual Framework; (2) Theoretical Framework and (3) Methodological Framework. The framework examined in each chapter is represented diagrammatically at the start of each chapter by a set of concentric circles.

The content of Chapter 1 falls under three headings: Historical and Cultural Context; Personal Experiences of Partnership work; Profile of Participating Schools and Communities. In the first section, the backdrop for the study is drawn from the rich tapestry of Ireland's Celtic past. To contextualise the study, the section provides a sketch of the personal experiences and philosophical approach of the researcher, developed over a period of fourteen years spent working in partnership with schools and communities in disadvantaged settings. The third section provides a pen-picture of the five school communities in which the study took place.

Chapter 2 is divided into three main sections: Social Inclusion Discourse; Educational Disadvantage Discourse; and Educational Partnership Discourse. An in-depth critique of the literature on each of these topics is presented and arguments are put forward for the promotion of educational partnership as a means of improving educational equality and increasing social equity in communities which are experiencing educational disadvantage.

Chapter 3 falls into four main sections, which describe the study's purpose, the study's objectives, the research rationale and the research design. The purpose of this chapter is to offer an overview of the methodological framework adopted in this study in attempting to gain a better understanding of the concept of educational partnership. At the start of the chapter, the four core research questions are presented as follows:

1. What were the benefits and outcomes for the schools, families and local communities of working in educational partnership?
2. What made the educational partnership process work well?
3. What prevented it from working well?
4. What models of partnership were most appropriate to the five participating schools?

Chapter 1

Contextual Framework

Introduction

This chapter outlines the contextual framework within which this thesis is set. The structure of the chapter is illustrated by the use of three concentric circles, each representing a section of the chapter under the following headings: (I) An Irish historical and cultural context; (II) Experiences of working in partnership; and (III) A profile of participating schools.

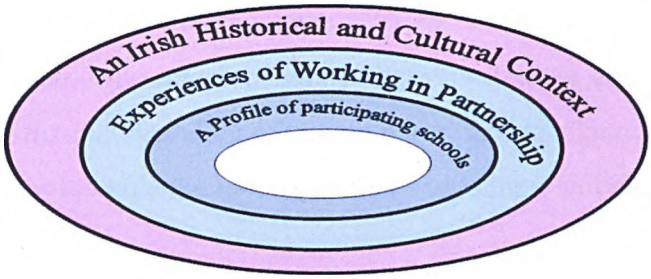


Figure 1.1: Contextual Framework Model

Section one, represented by the outer circle, locates the concept of partnership in Ireland's spiritual heritage which dates back to pre-Christian times and is a rich source of mystical wisdom that has much to offer human relationship studies in modern times. The interpretations of Ireland's Celtic traditions are drawn mainly from the works of O'Donohue (1997, 1998, and 2003), who explores one of our most basic desires, our desire to belong. Section two, represented by the second circle, seeks to relate this wisdom to my own experiences of working with families, schools and communities over the past fourteen years in educationally-disadvantaged settings in the mid-west region of Ireland. Section three, represented by the inner circle, offers a 'pen-picture' of the five primary schools and communities in which this research study took place.

(I) An Irish historical and cultural context

Our post-modern world has something to learn from the ancient Celtic beliefs and practices which have survived to this day as part of Ireland's rich heritage of spiritual wisdom. This thesis asserts that this ancient heritage is deserving of due consideration in social and educational development discourse. Even though modern day Ireland has, to a large extent, pushed spiritual matters off the debate agenda, many citizens still relish and celebrate Ireland's spiritual and cultural roots, which can be traced back to the customs and beliefs of the ancient Celts. Pagan customs and traditions were, over time, overlain by Christian beliefs and live on in Christian celebrations in different forms, particularly in rural Ireland. Celtic spirituality revered the spirit in all things and acknowledged and honoured the underlying unity of all creation. The religious beliefs and practices of the Celts recognised the interconnectedness of the people and the land and the interdependence between human beings and the animal world. Such a holistic understanding of human nature and its place in creation resulted in respectful attitudes towards the divine, human and natural worlds.

Ireland represents a Celtic tradition that was virtually untouched by the culture and civilisation of the Roman Empire. It is this relative isolation from Roman influence that makes Celtic spirituality unique in the Western world. Historians differ as to when the Celts reached Ireland, but a general consensus seems to point to some time in the fifth century BC. With them came the Iron Age, as evidenced in their weaponry and wrought iron works. Archaeological excavations show the Celts to have been skilled and creative artisans capable of intricate metalwork in gold, bronze and silver. Remnants of their beautiful pottery, textiles and wood-carvings, displayed in the National Museum of Ireland, offer an insight into their way of life and belief system.

Celtic life was lived in close-knit communities, which had developed a complex system of laws and codes of conduct. The Druids and Vision Poets occupied central roles within the tribal authority structure. These were men and women of great learning and discernment, who fulfilled a wide range of functions but were mainly the custodians of spiritual memory and customs. Since the Celtic world was primarily a matriarchal society, many of these wise people were women. Such women were held in high regard and were seen as the repository of the accumulated wisdom of the

family and the community. The Celts had a wonderful tradition of wisdom which subsequently continued into Irish monasticism. In spiritual matters, the feminine aspect of the Divine was acknowledged and honoured. Some historians contend that, in the transition from Celtic paganism to Celtic Christianity, St. Brigid replaced the pre-Christian goddess Brigida as a symbol of feminine power. O' Duinn (2005) believes that it is a futile task to try separating the historical Christian Brigid from the goddess, since both seem to be inextricably interwoven. It is clear, however, that her influence on spiritual matters was considerable and this was manifest in the equality of status for women in religious affairs. The monastery she founded in Kildare was one of the largest and most influential in Ireland and its reputation as a co-educational community of equality, learning and culture was held in high esteem throughout Europe until the suppression of the abbeys in the sixteenth century.

Pre-Christian Celtic culture, it must be noted, was non-literate and, consequently, its poetry, music, story and customs were handed on from generation to generation through the oral tradition. From this we understand that the Celts believed in various divine presences. Their most venerated god was Lugh, the god of light and giftedness. The ancient festival of *Lughnasa,* a time of celebration in the fullness of the harvest, takes its name from him. This festival was also associated with Anu, the goddess of the earth and mother of fecundity. Three goddesses of war: Morrigan, Nemain and Badb were acknowledgements of the darker and negative side of the human psyche, of which the Celts had a deep understanding. For them the physical and spiritual world co-existed in a harmonious relationship. O'Ríordáin (1998) informs us that, from the fifth century A.D. onwards, many of the early monastic scholars drew on this dearth of folk culture when writing the myths, legends and beliefs of ancient Ireland. Hence, one has to accept that much of what became the monastic culture of Ireland's golden age, from the sixth to the tenth century, is likely to be a blend of Celtic and Christian beliefs. In any event, Celtic Spirituality and Celtic Christianity evolved into a culture of enlightenment which reintroduced civilisation to Europe during the Dark Ages.

In the ancient Celtic world, the realms of the dead and living overlapped. Only a thin veil separated both worlds, which, on certain occasions and at certain times of the year, was lifted and allowed easy access from one world to the other. The harshness

of life, the constant presence of death and their affinity to nature invoked in the Celts an openness to possibilities, connections and relationships in their search for a deeper truth and for a meaning to their existence. While this heritage might seem to be lost in the image-driven superficiality of modern life, its legacy can still be found today, particularly in the more rural parts of the country. In this sense, O'Donohue (1997) holds that Celtic spirituality was imbued with a powerful fluency of longing and a flexibility of belonging, and he believes that the ancient psyche was never as isolated and disconnected as is the modern psyche. The Celtic conception of God incorporated the wonders of nature and the universe, such as the sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, oceans, forests, landscapes, and so on. These were seen as the ever-changing presence of God; a presence that is the source of all human inspiration and creation.

Central to Celtic traditions, then, was this deep reverence for the spirit in all things and a profound belief in a divine presence in the whole of creation. The Celts did not make distinctions between the secular and the sacred, but possessed a deep sense of humankind's close relationship to the natural world. The life of the individual was integrated into the life of the tribe and the life of the tribe was integrated with the earth and the world of nature. This wholeness was celebrated in their rituals, stories, poems and music, and was safeguarded in their law. Carmichael's (1994) collection of Celtic poems and folklore from the Celtic regions of Scotland conveys the same strong sense of interconnection between the practical and the mystical and offers glimpses of a people who had found a more holistic way of life and were at one with the world.

At this present time in Ireland, when productivity and consumption seem to be the only reasons for being alive, many people are searching for a way of being that is healing and affirming. In this respect, O'Donohue's (1997, 1998, and 2003) writings provide a source of profound mystical wisdom which opens pathways to creativity, compassion and inner peace. Drawing from Ireland's Celtic heritage, he takes us on a philosophical and theological journey which heightens our awareness of the need to combine our spiritual, imaginative and intellectual capacities in relating to ourselves, to others and the world around us. He believes that status, achievement and possessions will not make life meaningful without a true sense of belonging. Such a sense of belonging can liberate and empower us 'to trust fully the rhythm of loss and

longing. Like a welcoming circle of friendship, it also shelters us from the loneliness of life' (O'Donohue1998: xvii). He informs us that each human soul, even though individual and unique, hungers for relationships; it is one's soul which longs to belong and makes all belonging possible. He believes that the soul 'weaves us into the great tapestry of spirit which connects everything everywhere...and enables us to be participants at the very heart of creation'.

Our post-modern world, however, seems to exacerbate our sense of isolation and disconnection. The modern mind seems particularly homeless. The traditional safeguards of religion and cultural norms no longer seem to offer any shelter. 'The old shelters are gone and around us there is the severe cold breeze of isolation. This has made our desire for belonging all the more intense. We search continually for connection' (O'Donohue, 1998: 326). Glossy media images of 'the good life' exacerbate our feelings of lonesomeness, because deep down we know that such images are superficial and false. The same media images tend to define identity in terms of possessions and status, and while these occasionally numb our longings, they invariably leave us with feelings of futility. Such dislocation denies us a true understanding of our relationship with ourselves, with each other and with the whole of creation. 'Either we are in the universe to inhabit the eternity of our souls and grow real, or else we might as well dedicate our days to shopping and kill time watching talk-shows' (O'Donohue, 1998:28). Unavoidably, our lives are filled with the forced presence of aggressive visual images and a constant cacophony of noise. Modern technology provides instant communication to all parts of the world. Yet, this instant connectivity does not fulfil the human need for connection and belonging. In many instances, digital communication mechanisms are ways of avoiding real engagement with others and with ourselves. Instead, our lives are often controlled by a bombardment of trivia and often lived with such stress and intensity that we have little time for refining the task of our life's journey.

O'Donohue (1998) insists that there is an acute need to reawaken our sense of community. Perhaps it is only an exploration of the depths of belonging in the human mind and soul that will lead us to a full appreciation of community and friendship. Defining our sense of belonging will help us to become more true, loving, good and free. Such belonging is not merely external but goes to the heart of our existence and

our sense of belonging to the earth. Deep down in each of us there is a huge desire to belong. When this basic human need is unmet we are left to flounder in a never-ending quest for the something that is missing. This unfulfilled restlessness of the human heart is acknowledged in modern 'rock' music. A best-selling song screams out: 'I can't get no satisfaction', while another pivots on a recurring refrain: 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for'.

By way of a response, Celtic spirituality reminds us that we belong to the earth and that we do not live merely in our thoughts, feelings, or relationships. We are a part of the earth, not its masters. The Celts seemed to have an intuitive understanding of this truth. They did not worship within large buildings, but in natural settings where they attended to the divinity of wild places. They believed that being in nature was already to be in the Divine Presence. In this respect, it might be fair to say that all human beings experience the ancient longing for nature where the mind and heart finds rest. Nature can provide a source of tranquillity that sooths the troubled mind. The pace of modern life, however, with its constant activity and excitement, leaves little time or energy to seek a sanctuary for the soul. As O'Donohue (1998:25) points out, 'until we allow some of nature's stillness to reclaim us, we will remain victims of the instant and never enter the heritage of our ancient belonging'.

O'Donohue (1998: xviii) is very concerned by the loss of this sense of belonging in modern Irish society: 'with many of the ancient and traditional shelters now in ruins, it is as if society has lost the art of fostering community'. In our visually aggressive post-modern world, external images distract us from the inner world of the soul. One's deepest needs are not elsewhere, but here and now in the solitude of one's own soul. Unless one finds belonging in that solitude, external longings remain needy and driven. A deep sense of belonging invokes the ancient and eternal values of human life, that of truth, unity, goodness, justice, beauty and love.

In the Celtic tradition there is a beautiful understanding of love and friendship. These concepts are encompassed within the old Gaelic term *anam chara.* Literally translated it means soul friend, *anam* being the Gaelic word for soul and *cara* meaning friend. So *anam chara* in the Celtic world was the 'soul friend'.

> With the *anam chara* you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam chara,* your friendship cut across all convention, morality and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the 'friend of your soul' (O'Donohue, 1997: 35).

The *anam chara* concept was not merely a metaphor or ideal but was a soul bond which existed as a recognised and admired social construct. In the spiritual sense, God was pictured as the divine *anam chara,* the intimate, attentive and encouraging friend. In later times, the concept of the *anam chara* became an important aspect of Celtic monasticism, in which true disclosure of the self to another was an essential aid in the spiritual journey of self-discovery and union with the Divine. St. Bridgid, the abbess of the Kildare monastery, is reputed to have said that a person without an *anam chara* was like a body without a head.

The bond of such a friendship is not damaged by space or time, as it constantly reawakens an eternal echo of love in the hearts of those friends. O'Donnohue (1998:3) asserts that 'true belonging is gracious receptivity...where friends do not belong *to* each other, but rather *with* each other. This *with* reaches the depths of their twinned souls'. One of the elements of true friendship is to listen compassionately and creatively to what is not being said. Often secrets are not revealed in words, but lie hidden in the silences or 'in the depth of what is unsayable between two people' (O'Donohue, 1997:145). In psycho-analytic language this is referred to as *unconditional positive regard* and *accurate empathy,* both of which are seen as extremely important counselling skills. In modern life, however, much of what is expressed is superficial and repetitive and drowns out the inner voice of the soul. O'Donohue (1997:146) believes that

> a great tolerance for silence is desirable; that fecund silence which is the source of our most resonant language. The depth and substance of a friendship mirrors itself in the quality and shelter of the silence between two people.

From this we can see that the Celtic concept of friendship had much in common with the classical Greek concept and this is useful in developing our modern understanding of friendship. As human beings, we are social creatures and, as such, friendship is at the very core of our being. It is central to our lives, in part because the special concern

we have for our friends must have a place within a broader set of concerns, including moral concerns, and also because our friends can help shape who we are as persons. Friendship essentially involves a distinctive kind of concern for other human beings, which might reasonably be understood as a kind of love. However, while love does not necessarily demand reciprocity, friendship requires it. It takes two to form a friendship. The bond of friendship formed without question represents one of the noblest aspects of human life, as it both presupposes and fosters other human virtues. Such friendship carries within it notions of selfless giving, understanding, compassion and a spirit of collaboration, and aspires to what Aristotle refers to as 'virtuous friendship' (cited in Nixon, 2006:150). Aristotle (cited in Nixon, 2006: 153) maintained that

> virtuous friendship is [a friendship] between equals who have their own and each others best moral interests at heart. Such friendship is neither provisional nor instrumental, but unconditional in terms of what is good for oneself and the other: it is both inward-reaching and outward-looking. It is premised on the assumption that we become better people through the reciprocity afforded by our shared aspiration to help one another in doing so.

Clearly such friendship presupposes what Nixon (2004: 245) describes as 'virtuous dispositions towards truthfulness, respect and authenticity'. O'Donohue (2003) tells us that Plato in the *Symposium* puts forward a similar idea, namely, that one of the greatest privileges of a human life is to assist in awakening the soul of another human being. When the soul awakens, one begins to truly inherit one's life. You leave the kingdom of fake surfaces, repetitive talk and weary roles and slip deeper into the true adventure of who you are and who you are called to become. Thus, awareness is one of the greatest gifts you can bring to your friendship. Where there is a depth of awareness, there is a great reverence for human presence. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true; our lack of consciousness can cloak the presence of many an *anam chara* in the daily routine of our lives. Sadly, it is often loss which awakens this presence, and by then it is too late.

For many, the fragmented nature of modern-day life is a cause for concern. O'Donohue (2003: 143) believes that our lack of connection with nature and with one another is a serious issue. He decries the loss of the 'web of betweenness' where 'there was a sense that the individual life was deeply woven into the lives of others

and the life of nature'. He asserts that this web is unravelling fast and needs to be rebuilt:

> As in the rainforest, a dazzling diversity of life-forms complement and sustain each other; there is a secret oxygen with which we unknowingly sustain one another. True community is not produced; it is invoked and awakened (O'Donohue, 2003: 143).

Celtic tradition offers many good examples of this type of 'true' community, of which the following two models are worth exploring: (a) the early monastic model of community life, and, in later times, (b) the practice of the 'meitheal' (pronounced mehal) in rural Ireland.

(a) The Celtic monasteries are portrayed as caring communities of work, prayer and hospitality which were central to local life. Irish monastic rules specified a stern life of discipline in which prayer, poverty, and obedience were central themes. The monastic way of life is pictured as harmonious and co-operative, in which skills, talents and energies were shared in a zestful enjoyment of communal living. The monastic way of life was closely modelled on Celtic clan relations, and the monastery became the spiritual focus of the tribe or kin group, and a source of inspiration and example for the whole community. Irish monasteries were usually established by grants of land to an abbot or abbess who then selected the most scenic area in which to locate the monastery. The ruins of St. Kieran's monastery at Clonmacnoise on the banks of the Shannon and St. Kevin's establishment at Glendalough in the Wicklow Mountains are set against exceedingly beautiful backdrops. Since ancient Ireland had no cities, the numerous monastic establishments grew rapidly into the first population centres and became hubs of unprecedented prosperity, art, and learning. From the sixth century A.D. onwards, a monastic way of life spread to all parts of Ireland and by the end of the seventh century Irish monastic schools were attracting thousands of students from Britain and from Europe. As Europe descended into the Dark Ages, monks in remote parts of Ireland were busy copying all western literature upon which they could lay their hands. Cahill (1995: 3) informs us that 'the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian cultures were transmitted to the tribes of Europe' by Irish missionary monks.

(b) In later centuries, the 'meitheal' became a widespread practice throughout the country. This was a very traditional form of co-operative working with the aim of achieving a common goal. It was the accepted practice to borrow and share farm equipment and exchange labour. When manpower was required during the planting or harvesting seasons, helpers arrived from the neighbourhood without the issuing of any formal request for help. They brought with them whatever equipment was necessary for the task in question. There was an understanding that labour given in this way would be returned in full when their own time of need arrived. Payment was never part of this understanding but a good mid-day meal was always the norm, at which good-humoured banter and practical jokes were a constant source of enjoyment. My childhood memories of saving hay in the meadow, cutting turf in the bog, planting fields with wheat or vegetables, harvesting and threshing corn are packed full of such happy experiences. These were occasions of great community bonding and camaraderie, and of the strengthening of a sense of identity and belonging. This practice of collaborative work survived in Ireland up to the 1960s, when mechanised farming methods changed the nature of farm-work forever.

In exploring the concept of friendship in the modern world, Pahl (2000: 6) stresses the difficulties involved in advocating a return to the world we have lost and points to the 'need to understand the new basis for social connectedness". He regards the new concept 'social capital' as helpful in advancing our understanding of 'social connectedness' in the modern world. He expands on this to highlight the importance of raising awareness of our interdependence, and suggests that 'informal solidarity, based on friendship, may well become more important by providing the necessary cement to hold the bricks of an increasingly fragmented social structure together' (Pahl, 2000: 11). O'Donohue (2003:143) refers to this 'interconnectedness' as the 'web of betweenness', and suggests that the Celts had some intuitive knowledge of the power of combined positive energy. He points out that it was accepted within the Celtic tradition that, if you sent blessings or genuine best wishes out from your heart, they multiplied and returned again to bless your own life. He sees this as the heart of all kinship and affinity and asserts that a generous heart is never lonesome. On the basis of this view, it can be argued that fulfilment and contentment depend, to a large extent, on the lens through which we look at life and the attitude we bring to our work

and to our leisure. The following blessing encapsulates the essence of this wisdom and offers a pertinent ethos for working in partnership:

It is interesting to note that such blessings are still part of the everyday greetings and salutations of traditional Gaelic speakers along Ireland's western seaboard. To say 'hello', the Irish phrase '*Dia dhuit'* is used, which means 'God be with you'. Similarly, the phrase used for saying 'thank you', '*Go raibh maith agat*' also has deeper connotations. The word 'maith' means *good,* 'agat' means *to you* and 'go raibh' is the verb *to be*, so literally translated it would read 'may good be with you'. As such, the language used sets the tone for how we relate to people in our everyday lives. When approaching people at work, the salutation '*Bail ó Dhia ar an obair*' ('God's blessing on the work') is used. Countless other examples of similar Gaelic greetings and salutations suggest a culture that had developed a strong sense of respect, care and compassion for fellow pilgrims on life's journey.

The previous section offers an insight into an aspect of Ireland's historical and cultural legacy, and puts forward a philosophy of life from ancient Celtic times that is relevant for social and educational developments in our modern world. The next section attempts to relate elements of this Celtic wisdom to my own experiences of working in partnership in disadvantaged settings over a considerable period of time.

(II) Personal experiences and perspectives on working in partnership

As an assistant teacher for eighteen years and subsequently as a Home-School-Community-Liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator for ten years, most of my work life has been spent in the area of educational disadvantage and social inclusion. The work of a HSCL co-ordinator entails building stronger home-school-community links through home-visitation and networking with parents and community members. Parents are assisted in gaining a better understanding of their role as 'the prime and natural educators of children' (Irish Constitution, 1938: Article 42), and teachers are encouraged to adopt a more holistic and inclusive approach to children's education. The HSCL scheme was introduced into the Irish education system in the early 1990s. Under this scheme, in schools that are designated as disadvantaged, a member of the school staff is exempted from teaching duties to work in a full-time capacity as a HSCL co-ordinator. Regular home visitation to all families of school-going children is an essential part of this work, with the aim of creating cordial relationships and developing bonds of trust between the school and the home. The personal development of the co-ordinator, therefore, is prioritised, as his or her networking and relationship-building skills are seen as key to the success of the scheme. Utilisation of the local school as a hub through which community capacity might begin to flourish is a central tenet of the HSCL scheme.

Currently, I work on a project called Family-School-Community Educational Partnership (FSCEP), which operates in three urban and two rural schools in Ireland's mid-west region. This project is facilitated and managed by Mary Immaculate College, a third level College of Education and the Liberal Arts, linked academically to the University of Limerick. Like the HSCL scheme, the purpose of this project is to provide opportunities for families and schools to work more closely together in ways that will enhance family-school-community relationships. The work entails the co-ordination of a number of activity programmes across four curricular areas of primary education: literacy, numeracy, arts education and sport. For this, the schools receive a small amount of additional funding and are assisted in designing family-oriented activity programmes to suit their individual needs. Many different strategies are used in the hope of facilitating and involving as many parents as possible and much

attention is paid to developing local knowledge, skills and attitudes in expanding partnership practices in the schools.

While most of this work is very rewarding and enriching, it also has a darker side. On many occasions, a project worker is brought into close contact with the world of pain and malfunction that some families experience on an ongoing basis. It is depressing to observe the negative mode in which some communities and families function. This is clearly very destructive to the holistic development of children, resulting in blighted lives and wasted talent. In some of the neglected areas in which the FSCEP project operates, there exists a psychologically-damaging atmosphere which is extremely detrimental to children's wellbeing and which is very difficult to overcome.

At a time of great national prosperity, the gap between rich and poor has widened considerably. As a consequence, alienation and disaffection have become endemic in certain sectors of Irish society. A thriving economy seems to demand a fast pace of life and a macho image of 'survival of the fittest' which is unsympathetic to weaker members of society. The old class system may have largely vanished in Ireland, but our new system has a more subtle but equally lethal need for hierarchy. In the name of progress, we seem to have wholeheartedly embraced a capitalist culture which fosters an ideology of competitiveness and individualism and leaves a trail of destruction across the more fragile spectra of society.

While most agree that having time for others is one of the most important gifts we can give, we find that our time always seems to be in short supply. One distressing aspect of my work involved coming into contact with the loneliness experienced by so many people in modern times. The unseen world of male loneliness, particularly for young adult males, is one deserving of far more attention and sympathy. In my experience, there is nobody in contemporary Irish society quite so alienated and lost as young disaffected males, many of whom are the 'absentee' fathers of the children involved in the FSCEP activity programmes. Constructing a more central role for fathers in their children's education was a matter of concern for the FSCEP project. However, the culture of alienation prevalent in neglected areas constructs its own set of norms, fostering an attitude of anti-intellectualism among male adolescents. Is it any wonder, then, that we read of the rise in male suicide and cases of substance abuse amongst

those young men marooned on the edge of life. O'Donohue (1998) believes that the lonesomeness of contemporary life is partly due to our failure to be generous in caring. It is regrettable that pressures within our education system to raise academic standards frequently leave little room for teachers to deal with the neglected and less visible dimensions of children's lives. In this connection, many psychologists have pointed to the negative impact of unmet needs on children's educational and social development.

In developing an understanding of human needs and childhood development, two models are particularly helpful. Maslow's theory of human needs (1954) and Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework (1986) are very useful tools in helping to interpret the layers of complexity in the lived environments of children and their families. As these have provided a framework for my thinking in implementing some of the partnership activity programmes, it might be useful to examine both models in more detail.

Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs provides a framework for the analysis of the relationship between different human needs. It is usually presented as a pyramid, illustrating the idea that each level of need is based on meeting the needs described in the level beneath:

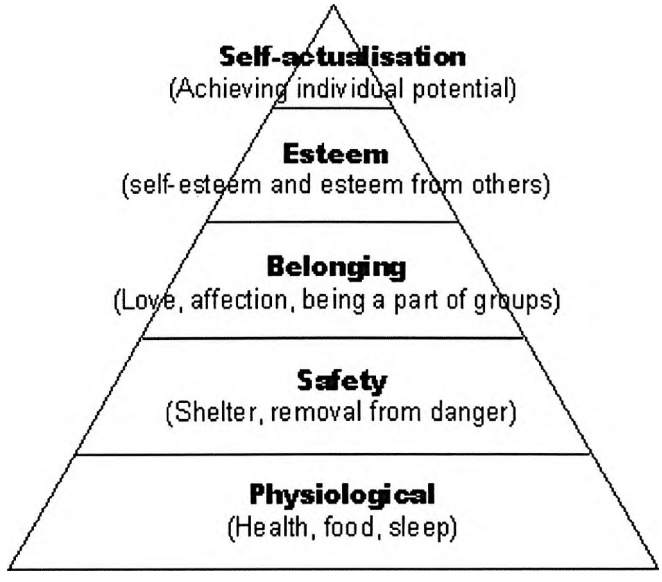


Figure 1.2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

http://changingminds.org/explanations/needs/maslow.htm (accessed on 12.03.08)

The pyramid begins at a basic physiological level and ascends to the level of safety, which includes shelter and stability. This leads on to the social stage, in which our need for love, affection and a sense of belonging is recognised. This is followed by our egoic need for self-esteem and the esteem of others. The final stage of self-actualisation recognises our need for creativity and self-development. The HSCL scheme and the FSCEP project focus their attentions mainly on stages 3, 4 and 5 of this pyramid, even though it is sometimes necessary to deal with the more basic human needs. The theory asserts that a person must have their needs met at the basic level, in order to enable them to progress to successively higher levels. In this regard, Kellaghan *et al.* (1995:30) state that 'when economic limitations leave families with no resources beyond those needed for survival, it is obvious that children will not be in a position to benefit fully from educational provision'. O'Donohue (1998) highlights a further spiritual need, which adds deeper meaning to our need to belong. He believes that a connection with the Divine gives a wholeness and meaning to our lives, and that this alone brings peace to the human heart.

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) socio-ecological model is useful in providing a framework for thinking about children's individual development. It recognises that human development is shaped, not only by one-to-one relationships, but also by a complex interrelationship of relationships and contexts. This model, outlined below as a series of concentric circles, depicts human beings as embedded within a nest of influencing systems which allow for interplay between individual and systemic development.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) describes these systems under the headings micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system. The innermost circle represents the micro-system, which includes the child's interpersonal relationships with the immediate family and home surroundings. The meso-system is the child's immediate neighbourhood and includes such agencies as childcare centres, schools, playgroups, clubs and so on. The exo-system encompasses the wider sphere of influences, including media influences and community culture and traditions. The macro-system includes societal values and international influences. This model helps us to understand how the child's development of a sense of self is influenced by a growing awareness of these broader cultural settings. It also provides an understanding for the child of the interrelationship between the local and the global.

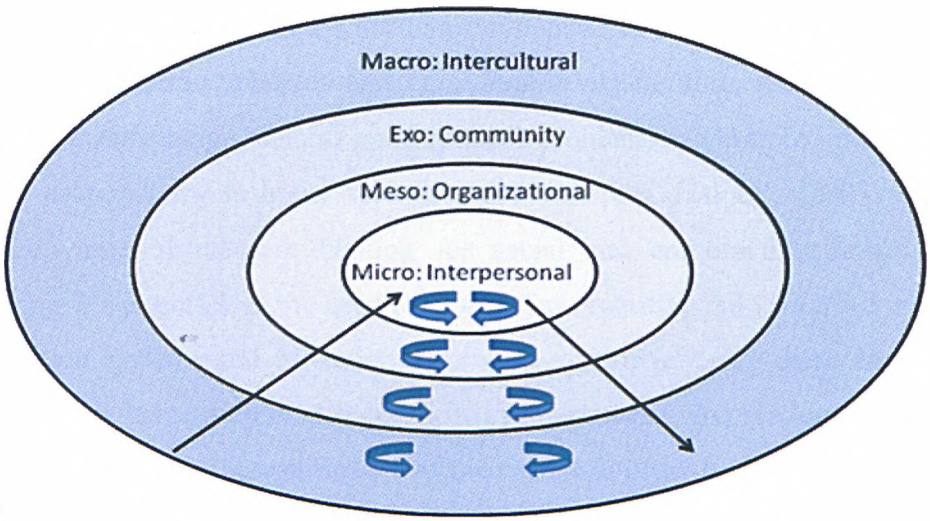


Figure 1.3: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1986) insights, the FSCEP project endeavoured to work in close liaison with other local agencies, such as state-sponsored Community Development Projects (CDPs) and Family Resources Centres (FRCs), and voluntary bodies, such as the Local Education Committees (LECs), wherever such existed. In this regard, an expansion of the school's network capacity was a welcome and inevitable outcome of taking part in the activity programmes. Endeavouring to operate within such a socio-ecological framework was a huge learning curve for all concerned, which resulted in placing the children's needs at the centre of our planned activities. The energy source which sustains this approach is a vision of a brighter future for these communities. This vision originates in the wellspring of hope that comes from joint endeavour and mutual support in working collaboratively, and is worth exploring further at this point.

The ability to mirror hope is one of the most important factors in bringing about change and improvement in underprivileged environments. In this respect, language is a powerful contributing factor. The language of hope that expresses commitment, integrity, and accountability energizes and sustains productive actions. Conversely, the language of complaint, dependency, and resignation can deaden the human spirit and leave everybody concerned feeling demoralised.

For teachers who are working with communities experiencing disadvantage, there is considerable uncertainty about what exactly the role of the teacher entails - a role that inevitably extends far beyond the academic syllabus. In modern-day Ireland, despite numerous intervention schemes and considerable expenditure, the phenomenon of educational disadvantage remains an intractable problem, resulting in low morale and an air of despondency in many schools. In this respect, Halpin's (2003) argument about the value of utopian thinking for social and emotional reform is worth considering. He emphasises the need for consensus regarding both what we want from our education systems and the most effective means of realising these ends. Halpin (2003:1) targets his argument at 'educational professionals who are looking at a fresh way of re-interpreting the significance of their work in order both to retain and renew a sense of optimism about and commitment to it'. He stresses the need for utopian thinking in discussions of the purposes of education and policy in meeting the challenges of the new millennium. Clearly, as educationalists, we must search for new ways of 'putting the hope back into the education process at a time when many teachers in schools are despairing of their work and feeling profoundly pessimistic about it as a result' (Halpin, 2003:1).

The aim of Halpin's book *Hope and Education* is 'to encourage in those who read it new forms of hopefulness in education through an appreciation of its relevance to thinking progressively about teaching and learning and management and governance in schools' (Halpin 2003: 2). In this regard, there is considerable evidence which suggests that one's 'whole being' is active in the learning process (Gardner, 1999; Nussbaum, 1995; Goleman, 1995; Garner, 2000a). This holistic understanding of learning has implications for all learners and educators. According to this approach, the 'rich unpredictability of learning' (Nixon, 2004: 245) is encouraged to flourish and many different learning styles are promoted. Nixon (2006: 151) suggests that 'we need to learn not only how to hope, but how to imbue our individual hopes with a sense of social purposefulness'. He argues, not only that 'community is still imaginable, but that imagining new forms of working together for the achievement of a better society is a moral imperative' (2006:151).

On this there can be little disagreement as much of our existence and the quality of our living is associated with the quality of our relationships. We exist within a

network of relationships, and the quality of these relationships determines the sense of satisfaction, achievement, enjoyment and fulfilment we experience. Much of the meaning in our lives is bound up with our relationships and the associated experiences.

To this end, Palmer (1998) looks to education systems as a way to 'explore and reawaken the depths of belonging in the human mind and soul that will lead us once again to unexpected possibilities of community and friendship' (O'Donohue, 1998: xix). Palmer perceives education as a spiritual journey and believes that our fragmented thinking in respect of the educational process is detrimental to good education:

> Education at its best – this profound human transaction called teaching and learning – is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world (Palmer, 1998: 26).

Such an approach forms the central thrust of the FSCEP project. As relationships with parents are built up, they are urged, through involvement in their children's education, to consider their own needs as well. The aim of the partnership activities is to build relationships by starting 'where the community is at'. This involves a process of building the capacity of all the 'partners' - parents, teachers, and community workers - by developing

- their willingness to work in partnership
- their awareness of the benefits for children of learning to work in partnership
- their capacity to recognise their respective knowledge-bases and expertise
- their capacity to listen effectively and to communicate in a non-intimidating manner
- their capacity to work as part of a multi-disciplinary team.

This study argues that, in order to bring these aims to fruition, individuals need to have a deep appreciation of our need to belong and of the nature of our interdependence on one another. Developing good home-school relations would have reciprocal effects on both teachers and parents for, as Pahl points out, 'it surely must be the quality of the relationship with significant others that is the basis for the most

effective social support' (2000: 147). With respect to the pupils within the educational partnership process, 'it is not friendship *per se* that is important, but rather the trust, security, feelings of self-esteem and feelings of being loved for one's own sake which may flow from it' (Pahl, 2000: 149). Improving the nature of interactions between families and schools enhances the capacity of both family and school to relate to each other. The quality of relationships between adults in a school may be seen as a strong indicator of the school's effectiveness in preparing children for life. In relation to this, MacBeath's (1996: 144) question demands reflection: 'What is the difference between 'success' for a school and 'success' for the individual who passes through it on the way to a lifetime in the community'? By way of response, Palmer (1998: 26) reminds us that education is essentially about "finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world". Hence, the enhancement of personal growth and the development of capacity at individual and community levels are prime objectives in the development of educational partnerships.

As indicated earlier, the FSCEP project works with five school communities located in the mid-west region of Ireland, three in Limerick city and two on the Atlantic seaboard. The following section offers a 'pen-picture' of these communities and provides detailed profiles of the five participating schools.

(III) Profiles of participating schools

This study was facilitated by the good will and assistance of the five school communities participating in the FSCEP project. The following 'pen-picture' of these schools and their communities will assist the reader in appreciating the outcomes of the study. The three urban schools are located in large local authority housing estates, built during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The housing development ethos of the time seemed to favour social segregation over social integration, thereby aggravating the social divide in the city. While the quality of the houses was of a reasonably high standard, the planning for social and community development in these areas was very limited. Little or no amenities were put in place, and this may have contributed to some of the serious social problems in these areas. For over three decades, unemployment has been endemic and many households have experienced three generations of welfare dependency.

In all three housing estates there is a constant reminder of anti-social behaviour. Vandalised buildings and burnt-out cars scar the streetscapes. Graffiti on walls reads *'smoke weed and fly'*, *'skinheads rule ok'*, *'... is a rat fink'*, *'... is a dead man walking'*, and so on. Many similar threatening signs convey an atmosphere of fear and intimidation to residents and visitors. Telltale signs of the insidious advance of Ireland's drug culture send poisonous messages to a younger generation. Accounts of young children throwing stones at police cars, ambulances and fire engines appear regularly in local newspapers. The schools are acutely aware of the multiple deprivations experienced by many of the children in their care, and endeavour to compensate for unmet needs in whatever way they can and wherever possible.

Both of the participating rural schools are situated on the western seaboard of Ireland, one in a small town setting and the other in remote open countryside. This region has a distinct tradition of Irish music, song and dance, in which the memory of the past is captured and celebrated. Both schools capitalise on this tradition and augment it by fostering in the students a love of Irish music and Irish culture. Members of the local population identify strongly with their distinctive traditions and have a deep sense of pride in the scenic surroundings of their area. Uniquely, the favourite traditional instrument in this region is the concertina, and this is taught in both schools to a level of high proficiency, which is a source of pride and joy for many parents and which helps to knit the schools and their communities more closely together. This closeness seems to provide a safeguard and protection against vulnerability and isolation. Homesteads are located quite far apart from each other, and so the school serves as a focal point where parents get to meet and chat and consolidate friendships as they wait to collect their children at the school gate.

All five schools participating in the FSCEP project have a mixed enrolment of boys and girls and vary greatly in size. Members of the teaching staff are predominantly female, with a variety of age groups, ranging from newly qualified to more experienced teachers. All schools are at varying stages of development, in terms of promoting parental involvement and creating links with their communities, but each school enjoys its own unique home-school-community dynamic, as is evidenced in their mission statements:

School A:
'...the management and staff, together with parents, strive to create a happy environment where pupils learn and develop spiritually, emotionally and socially. We endeavour to promote self-esteem, thus ensuring the overall development of each child, encompassing a life-long love of learning'.
School B:
'...in partnership and communication with parents [strives] to create a happy atmosphere and environment in a team spirit, which will enhance and encourage the teaching and learning of all pupils in order to develop their spiritual, cognitive, emotional, kinaesthetic, musical and social skills, thereby encouraging and making their learning and development a happy experience'.
School C:
'...aims to provide a welcoming, enjoyable, high quality and inclusive learning centre for all members of the local community'.
School D:
'...strives to provide a well-ordered, caring happy and secure environment where the intellectual, spiritual, physical, moral and cultural needs of the pupils are identified and addressed...cherishes all children equally and strives to develop the potential for learning that exists in each person'.
School E:
'...is committed to a working and learning environment in the Christian tradition where respect, co-operation and responsibility are essential to positive learning experiences'.

All of the schools are 'designated disadvantaged', and this status entitles them to additional funding and resources, the amount of which is dependent on the category into which the school is placed. The term 'designated disadvantaged' has recently been replaced by the acronym *DEIS* (Delivering Equality in Schools) Band 1 and *DEIS* Band 2 as indicators of levels of disadvantage. Schools in Band 1 are seen to experience greater levels of disadvantage than schools in Band 2. The three urban schools in the FSCEP project are categorised as Band 1, while the two rural schools are categorised as Band 2. *DEIS* represents a shift in emphasis from individual initiatives, each of which addresses a particular aspect of the problem to a strategy which adopts a multi-faceted and more integrated approach to reducing inequality and promoting social inclusion. Over the past three decades, numerous intervention measures have been put in place to help schools whose pupils are experiencing educational failure. These initiatives are now set out in a more integrated form in the current partnership agreement *Towards 2016*, the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-16* and in the social inclusion chapters of the *National Development Plan* (see www.irlgov.ie).

Participation in these schemes is obligatory for all designated schools, while participation in the FSCEP project is voluntary and limited by funding constraints to a small number of schools. Volunteering to take part in the FSCEP project indicates a commitment on the part of the schools to further improve family-school-community relations and a recognition of the centrality of this relationship in supporting the school learning of children. What FSCEP offers the schools is an acceleration of growth in parent-teacher collaboration and a deeper grounding of the children's education in the local community.

The following individual school profiles, compiled in collaboration with the principals and members of staff in each school, will give a clearer picture of the context in which this research took place and a greater appreciation of the research findings. As pointed out above, schools A, B, and C are in the *DEIS* Band 1 category, and schools D and E are in *DEIS* Band 2 category.

School A

School A is an urban junior school with an enrolment of approximately seventy children up to the age of eight, consisting of one Junior Infant Class, one Senior Infant Class, two First Classes and one Second Class. In addition to five *mainstream teachers* the school enjoys the services of a *resource teacher*, one *learning-support teacher,* a *resource teacher for Travellers* and a *home-school-community liaison co-ordinator*. The school has also the services of two *special needs assistants*, a *caretaker* and a *secretary*. Apart from the caretaker, all staff members are female. In this school the position of principal does not carry teaching duties, which is clearly a big advantage from an educational partnership perspective. There is also a *deputy principal,* one *assistant principal* and five *special duties post holders* who assist in school administration. The school is in the process of forming a parent/teacher association which will, according to the principal, "build on the existing strong co-operative partnership between parents and teachers".

The school building was erected in 1971 and was imaginatively designed in hexagonal fashion around a central complex. The school is maintained in very good condition and is bright and airy in aspect. There is a medium-sized hall that facilitates indoor play, Christmas and summer shows and various other gatherings. The school

looks out onto a large tarmac playing area where the children spend their lunch-breaks. At the further end of this yard, a prefabricated building houses two pre-school groups comprised of twenty-eight children. The school grounds are surrounded by a high railing and the large entrance gate is locked at the end of the school day.

Many of the children experience a variety of social problems, of which the teachers are acutely aware. The commitment and dedication of the teaching staff to the children in their care and to their families is manifest in numerous ways. The atmosphere of the school is cheerful, pleasant and caring and the children enjoy a variety of extra-curricular activities, many of which are funded and organised through the FSCEP project.

School B

This is a large urban school, with a teaching staff of thirteen *mainstream teachers*, which caters for two hundred and twenty-four pupils from junior infants to sixth class. In addition, there are five *resource teachers*, a *home-school-community liaison co-ordinator*, and an *early start teacher*, giving a total staff of twenty-one, only one of whom is male. Four *special needs assistants* are employed in the care of children with special educational needs. The post of principal is administrative and has additional support from six staff members who hold special duties posts, as well as a *deputy principal* and two *assistant principals*. The school has the benefit of full-time secretarial and part-time caretaking services.

The *principal* speaks highly of the staff and points out the variety of musical and artistic talent amongst them. As might be expected, music and singing feature highly in all classes from the Early Start Group (3 year olds) right up to sixth class. Art and craft activities also feature prominently throughout the school curricula. The caring ethos of the school is evident, and the commitment and enthusiasm of the teachers towards the children and their families is very obvious. The school has recently put a formal parent-teacher association in place and, as a consequence, parent input into the life of the school has increased further.

The school is housed in a large two-storey building which was erected in 1963 but is still in good repair. The classrooms are traditional in design with much of the old

furniture still in use, which, it might be argued, is not conducive to using different learning styles or working in groups. Nevertheless, innovative approaches to teaching and learning are employed in the daily life of the school. The school building looks on to a concrete yard with sheds on two sides providing shelter from the rain. Beyond the yard there is a large green area of well maintained grass, and on the other side of the school there are two structured play areas, one containing swings and slides and another made up of a nature trail with raised flower-beds, trees and shrubs. The school is surrounded by a high railing and both entrance gates are securely locked each evening.

School C

Like School A, this school is also an urban infant school, of similar size but with somewhat less resources and facilities. There are four *mainstream teachers*, along with two *resource teachers*, one shared *resource teacher for Travellers,* a shared *home-school-community co-ordinator* and one part-time *special needs assistant*. The *principal* has full teaching duties, and currently the school does not have secretarial or caretaking assistance, which occasionally presents challenges for making arrangements and organising events. There are seventy children registered on the school roll. A pre-school group is also housed in the building and, while it provides a very valuable and much needed service, this adds to the general congestion. The all-female staff, two of whom hold special duties posts, have over the years adopted 'an open-door' policy towards parents and members of the community.

The school building was erected in 1945. It consists of a long single-storey building divided into five traditional-style rooms. This school does not have an all-purpose room and there is very little additional space for indoor activities or meetings. In spite of very inadequate facilities and space, the school engages in high levels of parent involvement and participation. The atmosphere is welcoming and friendly and the hustle and bustle along the corridor at drop-off times and collection times gives rise to much good-humoured banter. A high metal fence surrounds a newly surfaced and extended tarmac yard. This yard is used during lunch-breaks and provides ample space for the children to run and play in safety.

School D

This school is situated in a small town on the western seaboard. The original school dates back to the 1850s, but the building has undergone a number of renovations and extensions in recent times. It is a large school, catering for two hundred and ninety-five pupils, with twelve *mainstream teachers*, nine *special needs assistants*, seven *resource teachers*, one *language teacher*, one *special class teacher (Asperger Syndrome Disorder)*, one *home-school-community co-ordinator,* a part-time *secretary* and a full-time *caretaker*. The age of the staff members varies widely, and this is seen as a positive dynamic in the school. There are four male staff members, one of whom is the *principal*. In this school the *principal* is assisted in administrative duties by twelve members of staff, all of whom hold *special duties posts*.

The school fosters partnership processes at various levels. It works in close liaison with the School Completion Programme (SCP) and high levels of parental involvement are evident. The school also maintains an active parent-teacher association, which has been in place for a number of years. The Board of Management embraces the concept of partnership within the school community and employs a privately-funded play-therapist two days per week. The caring ethos of the school is manifest in many ways and the needs of the children are seen as paramount. Adjacent to the main building is a new Autistic Unit catering for four children, aged eight to ten. Whenever possible, the children from this Unit are integrated into the life of the school.

One of the interesting features of this school is the multi-purpose split-level quadrangle in the centre of the building which is used for physical education activities, school concerts and assembly time. This space acts as a focal point and a show-case for many of the school's activities. Surrounding the quadrangle are large bright classrooms which provide adequate space for different teaching and learning styles. Adjacent to the school is a large gymnasium with good facilities and two large outdoor play areas, which run down to a busy street where town and school seem to meet. Members of the community can sometimes be seen observing or chatting to the children during lunch breaks.

School E

School E is a small rural school situated in open countryside which caters for twenty-eight children from junior infants to sixth class. The school has an all-female staff consisting of two *mainstream teachers* (one of whom is the *principal)*, one *resource teacher*, two *special needs assistants* and a part-time *secretary*. The school is characterised by a tranquil, caring atmosphere and this ethos extends to the children's behaviour, the older children actively engaging in activities with younger children. In conjunction with the FSCEP project, much parent-teacher activity has taken place in recent years. This tightly-knit community has strong allegiance to its school, and many parents have given freely of their time and energy to develop the school grounds. School celebrations enjoy full attendance, not only amongst parents but also amongst grandparents and other family members. Some discussions with regard to the formation of a formal parent-teacher association have recently taken place.

The original building, which was erected in 1933, consisted of two rooms and a corridor, but a recent extension has added greatly to the school's amenities, with, an office for the principal, a special educational needs room, an all-purpose room and improved toilet facilities. The school is situated on a large plot of ground surrounded by scenic views and with much potential for development. The building is being upgraded, bit by bit, in a combined effort by parents, teachers and the older children. While some decry the shortage of funding and the slow progress in this process of development, others see the process as serving to unify the community and highlight the importance of the school's position in the parish.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to convey the context and setting in which this study took place. The first section provided a discussion of an aspect of Ireland's historical and cultural legacy which has particular relevance for the topic of this thesis - namely, the rich spiritual heritage of the Celtic tradition. The second section described my own work experiences and knowledge accumulated during the course of a ten-year period spent working in partnership in the HSCL scheme and a further four years as co-ordinator of the FSCEP project. Attempts were made to link these experiences with international findings in this field and to relate these to the Celtic wisdom of Ireland's

past. The third and final section presented a detailed portrait of the five participating schools and their communities, in order to convey the minutiae of the local context of the study. The next chapter provides a theoretical framework for the review and discussion of the literature relating to this research topic.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

The three concentric circles below illustrate the broad theoretical framework within which this study is situated. The structure of this chapter falls into three sections which are dealt with under the following headings: (1) social inclusion discourse, (2) educational disadvantage discourse, and (3) educational partnership discourse.

Figure 2.1: Theoretical Framework Model

Section one provides a review of the literature on social justice in relation to education generally and in relation to the Irish educational system in particular. Section two provides a critique of seminal works on educational disadvantage at both national and international levels, in the context of current educational partnership debates. Section three examines the literature dealing with aspects of, and approaches to, educational theory which relate to the purpose, process and outcome of educational partnerships.

(1) Social inclusion discourse

Terms like 'social disadvantage' and 'social exclusion' are used interchangeably to describe the plight of members of those segments of society which are deprived of normal social or economic benefits. Definitions of these concepts refer to lack of

participation in society and emphasise the multi-dimensional and multi-layered nature of this exclusion. In the international arena, the United Nations Development Programme (www.undp.org) has been at the forefront of attempts to conceptualise social exclusion across the developed and developing worlds. In so doing, the UN has adopted a rights-focused approach, which defines social exclusion in terms of lack of access to the institutions of civil society, and to the basic levels of education, health, and financial wellbeing required in order to make access to those institutions a reality.

Modern sociological thinking accepts that members of a social and political democracy are held together in a moral ecology which transcends the different interests, economic stratifications, cultural origins, religions, ethnicities, and races it embraces, indeed, not only embracing difference but celebrating it. Social scientists argue that social cohesion is essential in maintaining the contract on which civil society is founded. Social exclusion is seen to lead to individuals being deprived of their citizenship and feeling alienated and disenfranchised, which in turn has a negative impact on society and on the economy of the state. Hence, in modern times, governments in all developed countries devote much attention to the creation of policies promoting social inclusion, strategies to combat poverty and initiatives to promote equality.

In Ireland, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997) set specific targets for reducing poverty. The document (National Anti-Poverty Strategy, 1997: 9) emphasised that '...underachievement at school begets social difficulties which can lead to a life of uncertainty, marginalisation and dependence on the structures of social assistance'. Yet, despite Ireland's economic progress over the past decade, research indicates (CORI, 2002) that the gap between rich and poor has increased dramatically. Due to a number of rapid social changes and the influence of significant publications originating from EU sources (EU, 1995; OECD, 1996,1997), Ireland's educational policy has been reshaped in a number of different directions and this has been instrumental in changing legislation structures as well as attitudes towards education. These changes have led to a renewed focus on social inclusion policies, with particular attention paid to groups such as the Travelling community, refugees and asylum seekers, lone parent families, the long-term unemployed and special educational needs groups.

As a result of the findings of the OECD report of 1997, which revealed the literacy levels of an alarmingly high percentage of the adult Irish population to be below the level deemed necessary to function optimally in society, much educational research was re-focused on the link between schooling and the subsequent economic success of citizens. Many other sources have drawn attention to the inequalities and social stratification within the Irish education system (Lynch, 1999; DES, 2000; Clancy, 2001; Hyland, 2003). Their research findings indicate that educational underachievement is widespread in areas of disadvantage, that lower socio-economic groups are disproportionately represented in third level education, that education and poverty are directly related, and that there is a clear inter-generational pattern to educational underachievement.

For many decades, Bourdieu's perspective on social capital as a mediating factor in academic success has been presented as a useful approach to understanding social exclusion within education. Bourdieu (1986: 248) suggests that social capital is 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition'. O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2005:65, 66) contend that Bourdieu's theory 'proffers an invaluable conceptual lens through which social inclusion in education may be investigated and advanced alongside a learning partnership rationale'. Bourdieu's ideas about social capital differ somewhat from other understandings put forward by Coleman (1991) and Putnam (1995), insofar as, for Bourdieu, social capital is seen to operate as a tool of cultural reproduction which shapes an individual's thoughts and actions in ways that affect educational achievement. In this respect, Bourdieu's theory challenges deficient thinking about educational underachievement and offers a constructive approach to the study of disadvantaged learners.

Bourdieu's perspective on social capital (1977a, cited in O'Brien and O'Fathaigh 2005: 68) involves three key theoretical concepts: 'habitus', 'capital' and 'field'. The habitus concept explains how social and cultural messages affect an individual's thoughts and actions. In relation to this Rudd (2003:7; cited in O'Brien and O'Fathaigh 2005: 68) asserts that 'those in higher-class groupings are more likely to

realise the value of schooling, both in the field of education and the occupational field, thus increasing the likelihood of reproducing their position'. This proffers a socio-cultural explanation for the under-representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds at higher education levels. The second theoretical pillar of Bourdieu's theory is the concept of 'capital', which Rudd, (2003) describes as economic, social, cultural or symbolic. A degree of reciprocity exists between each of these forms of capital that serve as 'instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed' (Bourdieu, 1977b. cited in Rudd, 2003:54).

In relation to 'capital', O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2005: 69) assert that all forms of capital - economic, social, cultural and symbolic - 'are the key factors that define positions and possibilities for individuals engaged in any field' and point out that 'a 'multiplier effect' frequently emerges in relation to any form of capital accumulation, i.e., one capital often exchanges for another'. The third conceptual pillar of Bourdieu's theory of social capital is the idea of 'fields'. This concept relates to 'a structured space of forces and struggles, consisting of an ordered system and an identifiable network of relationships that impact upon the habitus of individuals (O'Brien and O' Fathaigh, 2005: 70). Education is regarded as such a field, since it sets the rules which regulate behaviour within that field. Bourdieu claims that, as individuals enter the field, they become more aware of the 'rules of the game' and have greater capacity to manipulate these rules through their established capital appropriation. This can result in hegemonic practices which create environments in which those who lack the required forms of capital are culturally dominated and obliged to compete without questioning the rules.

In this respect, Noguera (2001: 193) argues that schools can act as formative agents, because 'when schools have formed a genuine partnership based on respect and a shared sense of responsibility, positive forms of social capital can be generated'. Noguera (2001: 197) concludes that, within an urban context,

> '... [the] goal must be to transform urban schools into sources of social stability and support for families and children by developing their potential to serve as sources of intra-community integration and to provide resources for extra-community linkages'.

Within the educational context, 'schools develop social capital by becoming caring communities' (Sergiovanni, 1998:38). Halpern (2005:143) highlights the special relationship between education and social capital and cautions educators to be cognisant of this, since 'deficits in social capital may play a role in [the] educational underperformance of many disadvantaged young people'. Stanton-Salazar *et al.* (2005:412) highlight the latent potential of the school to build social capital among its youth, by providing a 'facilitating institutional context' in which young people can 'get to know and learn to trust one another'. Thus, schools that choose to work in partnership and build positive working relationships with their communities can contribute to positive learning outcomes which have the potential to break the cycle of intergenerational underachievement in education.

Over the course of several decades, many theoretical works have been devoted to the relationship between education systems and class reproduction (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Reay and Ball, 1997; O'Brien, 2001). Much attention has been focused on the tension between inhabiting and maintaining a working-class identity and being part of the present educational system. Reay (1997) sees 'working-class identity' as a spoiled identity, which has been imbued with a strong sense of 'otherness' by the school system. To become 'respectable', the young working-class person has to cast off the identity they were brought up with, in order to fit in and to acquire the right ways of being and the right ways of speaking and dressing. Many researchers (Skeggs, 1997; Mahony and Zmroczek, 1997; O'Brien, 2001) focus on this dilemma for students from working-class backgrounds and point out that the choice facing these students is either to conform to an education system which supports the dominant, middle-class culture, or to resist it. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) are highly critical of institutions which deploy this type of embodied knowledge as power and perceive the imposition of a dominant culture on minority groups as symbolic violence.

The type of embodied knowledge that functions as power within certain institutional settings promulgates a 'culture of embedded failure' (Brighouse, 2008: guest lecture) which, for many students, militates against academic success. The challenge for proponents of educational partnership, therefore, is how to include the knowledge and experience of groups who have traditionally been marginalised within the formal

curriculum. As pointed out by Freire (1972) and Giroux (1983), this inclusion must accord the same status to the experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged classes as has been traditionally accorded to the dominant culture. For, as hooks (1994:178) points out, class lies at the heart of educational systems, shaping 'values, attitudes, social relations and the biases that form how knowledge is given and received'. A student who inhabits a working-class identity has developed the survival mechanisms of that culture and has adopted 'ways of being' which have evolved through that culture. How these practices and identities are received and valued (or devalued) is a key question for schools. Is the individual who embodies these practices accepted or made to feel different and marginalised within the system? Does the answer lie in developing close working relationships with parents and local communities? Would a partnership model of education help to create the conditions for a truly democratic society, one which 'makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms' (Dewey, 1916: iii)?

One of the major difficulties for educationalists lies in how to construct differences in language codes, codes of behaviour and the discipline systems of home and community within an educational epistemology which avoids the pitfalls of the past, such as seeing differences as deficits. Lynch and O'Neill (1994) argue that most intervention schemes in Irish education are informed by concepts of deficit, which tend to exonerate school systems for student underachievement by shifting the blame onto those who are the victims of educational disadvantage. The vast majority of schemes aimed at improving educational equity have been proposed, accepted and acted on without any consultation with working-class parents. McCulloch (1994) speaks of the profound unease experienced in the UK during the 1990s as a result of the failure of the education system to cater for all children equally. Similarly, Coldron & Boulton (1996:53) state that unease has been expressed in the UK at the 'unevidenced' way in which parental wishes are invoked to 'legitimate policy'. The voice of disadvantaged communities remains largely unheard, and their 'psychologies have been pathologised and alienated by labour markets, poor housing, welfare dependency and material poverty...their stories composed mainly by intellectual theorists' (Goodley and Lawthom, 2005:136). Intervention schemes in Ireland are aimed mainly at the family or children, rather than at the school system itself. Within these programmes, knowledge of parental needs and wishes has been presumed, and

parental compliance taken for granted. According to Lynch & O'Neill (1994: 307), this 'has resulted in policies designed to manage rather than eliminate inequality in education'.

Education is intimately bound up with issues of social justice. When education facilitates an appreciation of these issues, it empowers people in their struggles to bring about a fairer society. Freire recognised that, 'if oppressed people are to gain emancipation, then they need to be wholly involved in the construction and doing of their own self-empowerment' (cited in Goodley, 1998: 124). When education ignores injustice locally and globally, it plays a role in teaching people not to think about such issues and, in doing so, helps prevent struggles for justice from taking place. Thus, any movement towards a more equal society will require a renewed focus on moral imperatives and significant changes in cultural values and attitudes.

This raises recurring questions with regard to the purpose of education and what sort of society we want to achieve. Do we interpret educational success in terms of students' academic achievements and potential contribution to the economic progress of the state, or do we need broader terms of reference which focus on the public good and on social inclusion? Do schools have a role in promoting a form of democratic education in which community capacity is enhanced and social capital is nurtured?

(II) Educational disadvantage discourse

This section scrutinises understandings of educational disadvantage by examining three different perspectives on this complex concept: (a) the residual perspective, which views educational disadvantage from a *deficit* perspective, (b) the dominant perspective which views education and educational disadvantage from a *free-market* perspective, and (c) the emergent perspective which views educational disadvantage from a *cultural difference* perspective. In the following section, the literature in relation to each of these perspectives is reviewed and discussed.

(a) *Deficit perspective*

Older studies of educational disadvantage focus predominantly on the 'deficit' perspective (Kluckhohn, 1962; Sugarman, 1966; Craft, 1970). According to these studies, many families who were destined for lives as clients and recipients of social

services were seen as needy and deficient. This model identifies the cause of educational disadvantage as a deficit in the family or community, associated with particular patterns of parent-child interaction, neglect or abuse, a culture of poverty or ghettoisation, resulting in reduced linguistic ability. This approach focused on perceived deficiencies in the homes and seemed to place the blame for educational disadvantage on those who were experiencing it, exonerating the education system from the duty to perform any critical self-reflection. Even though the 'deficit perspective' has for long been discredited in research findings, many of the ideas on which it was based continue to exert an influence on teachers' views and expectations (Edwards, 1992). These ideas generally focus on issues of language, ability and parental attitudes to education. Government policy responses to educational disadvantage have been strongly influenced by the 'deficit' perspective. According to Scott-Jones (1993: 247) 'American researchers concluded that the poor school achievement of low-income children was due to the impoverished language environment in their homes'. This view led to numerous interventions, such as Head Start, which

> ...provided not only parent-training activities but also a center-based educational component for preschool children and parent involvement in the governance of the program. Involvement in governance was intended to empower the low-income and minority parents who received Head Start services; in practice, however, Head Start came to concentrate on training parenting skills, as did other intervention programs (Scott Jones, 1993: 248).

In extreme cases, this view of working-class students resulted in formal contracts being drawn up between schools and families, which sometimes included the provision of vouchers and stipends (Gillum, 1977, cited in Henderson and Berla, 1994), stipulating parents' tasks: to provide a special place in the home for study, to encourage the child daily through discussions, to attend to the student's progress and compliment him/her on gains, and to cooperate with the teacher appropriately (Walberg *et al.*1980, cited in Henderson & Berla, 1994). The aim of such schemes was to make family environments more educationally productive, in line with the ethos of 'middle-class' schools and with little regard for the cultural diversity of home backgrounds. The 'deficit' view is now seen as biased and simplistic, and the tools of evaluation previously used to substantiate the so-called deficit have been recognised as biased in favour of the culture of the middle classes (Lane, 1989).

Even though discredited the deficit perspective is still widely held under the guise of the free-market perspective. Broadly speaking the Irish education system continues to operate under the hegemonic 'meritocratic' assumption that those who are academically able and make the effort succeed, irrespective of class and cultural background (Lynch, 1999). This individualistic meritocratic perspective seems to have become so ingrained that it is a powerful ideology underpinning much of the thinking and practice in Irish education today. It promotes the view that society should reward individuals for their possession of certain types of knowledge and academic abilities. During the recent economic boom the free-market perspective has been dominant in Irish educational discourse and in government policy.

(b) *Free-market perspective*

Proponents of a neo-liberal ideology believe that market forces and consumer choice in education would raise standards and render education largely self-regulating. This view, however, ignores the narrow way in which ability is defined (Goleman, 1995; Garner, 2000; Sternberg, 2003), and ignores the role played by social context in children's learning. In developed economies, the stress on higher standards, more rigorous testing, education for employment and a much closer relationship between education and the economy in general is driven by a fear of losing in international competition. The philosophy underpinning this position is a belief that all people act in ways which maximise their own personal benefits. Students, on this view, are seen as human capital. Apple (2001:40) informs us that 'growing empirical evidence indicates that the development of 'quasi-markets' in education has led to the exacerbation of existing social divisions surrounding class and race' and that this has resulted in 'more educational apartheid, not less'.

Much has been written about hegemonic dominance within education systems (Apple, 1989; Giroux, 1983; Ball *et al.,* 1994; Giroux and McLaren, 1995; McCulloch, 1998) and the need to confront epistemologies which view education only as a private good. These authors, amongst others, highlight the growing commercialisation of education throughout the developed world and point out that this is not conducive to debates on the moral purpose of education. The 'conservative movements that are continuing to reconstruct education in damaging ways' must be resisted, in order to protect 'the

lives and hopes that will be lost if we do not continue to battle against these policies' (Apple, 2001: ix). The same sentiments are echoed by McCulloch (1998:1), who states that 'the majority of pupils have failed to traverse the obstacles that have been erected to judge their performance and potential'. He condemns an educational system which 'marks off the superior from the inferior, the first rate from the second rate', and results in a large percentage of school-leavers emerging 'into adult life branded as failures from its processes of classification and grading'. The forces driving free-market approaches to education which compel schools to favour a narrow range of academic abilities over a wider range of abilities and interests must be seen as an area of urgent concern for educationalists. Otherwise, the outcome of the current ideological battle being played out within debates about education will have serious consequences for those experiencing educational disadvantage and learning difficulties.

From a free-market perspective, education is seen as imparting neutral knowledge to students as a way of preparing them to compete in today's rapidly changing world. Students' achievements are assessed, by and large, by their ability to reproduce the knowledge they have been taught. The vexed question of what or whose knowledge makes up the curriculum is seldom asked, let alone answered. The intricate set of connections between knowledge and power is rarely explored by educators. Apple (2001:8) sees the 'rightist social movement' as an ominous threat to our individual welfare and wellbeing. He portrays this hegemonic alliance as being an exceptionally powerful force that successfully draws together four different strands of thinking in the US, which he categorises as *neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists* and a particular faction of the managerial and professional *new middle class.* This diverse coalition of forces is promoting a 'rightist agenda that is changing our common-sense, altering the meanings of the most basic categories, the key words we employ to understand the social and educational world and our place in it' (Apple, 2001:9).

This rightist agenda endeavours to radically alter who we think we are and how our major institutions are to respond to this changed identity. He challenges academic practitioners to oppose this movement and points to how it can be countered; 'if you want to stop the right, it is absolutely crucial to study what it did' (Apple, 2001:9). To

illustrate this line of thought, he highlights the key words that continually surface in the debates over education: markets, standards, God and inequality. He explains that answers are not determined by words, but by the power relations which determine the interpretations of these concepts. Each of these concepts contains suggestions of democracy, freedom, choice, morality, family, culture and so on, and these are linked to sets of assumptions about 'appropriate' institutions, values, social relationships, and policies within the dominant ideology. As Freire (1997) observes, in education 'when we try to be neutral, like Pilate, we support the dominant ideology. Not being neutral, education must be either liberating or domesticating' (cited in Sterling *et al.*, 1995:63).

Understanding how rightist policies in education draw attention to certain issues as 'real' problems, while marginalising others is, according to Apple (2001), the first step in winning the ideological battle currently taking place in the arena of education. He delineates a more expansive ideal of freedom and feels that 'each and every one of the gains associated with it are now under threat' (Apple, 2001:15). He contends that the *neo-liberal* agenda of a marketised society - and this includes schools - is anathema to education and creates disadvantage, inequality and social exclusion. He demands that we 'must question if this is the ethic we should be introducing as *the* model for our public institutions and our children' (Apple, 2001:19).

Whitty *et al.* (1998:58) concur with Apple, arguing that the assumption that competition will enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of schools with regard to educational disadvantage is ill-founded, and that 'in the context of broader policies [does] nothing to challenge deeper social and cultural inequalities'. Apple (2001: 52) states that, within neo-liberal thinking, 'we can find claims that what the poor lack is not money, but both an 'appropriate' biological inheritance and a decided lack of values regarding discipline, hard work, and morality'. The neo-liberal faith in the essential fairness and justice of markets, coupled with the belief that markets will ultimately distribute resources efficiently and fairly according to effort, is inherently flawed by the inability to recognise that 'the market definition of 'value' is entirely and systematically divorced from morality and emptied of moral meaning' (Sikes and Goodson, 2003: 35). Gillbourne and Youdell (2000) concur with this, pointing out

that such policies lead to the deskilling of teachers, the intensification of their work and the loss of autonomy and respect.

Similarly, Nixon (2004) decries the growing pressure on schools to link education more closely to the economy, and points to the changing terminology being used in current educational discussions. Teachers are being conditioned to think in business terms, using a 'language of cost-efficiency, value for money, productivity, effectiveness, outcome-delivery, target-setting and auditing' (Nixon, 2004: 246). This ideological drift is being driven by the increased influence of the corporate sector on educational policy and practice, and will ultimately prove detrimental to educational studies as presently understood. As Nixon (2004:246) observes, it 'constitutes a new way of thinking about teaching and learning' and 'radically alters what we are talking about'.

Thus, the marketisation of education brings about a shift of emphasis from student needs to student performance and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school. Ball *et al.* (1994) assert that the coupling of markets with the demand for publication of such performance indicators as 'examination league tables' in England has meant that schools are increasingly looking for ways to attract 'motivated' parents with 'able' children. In this way, schools are able to enhance their relative position in local systems of competition. Families experiencing educational disadvantage might well be seen as a liability within such a system. Whitty *et al.* (1998) note with alarm the rate of students being excluded from schools in England and assert that this is caused by the intense pressure on schools to constantly demonstrate higher achievement rates. In essence, this pressure has given rise to a process whereby the state can shift the responsibility for inequality in access and outcomes from itself onto the schools, parents, and children.

The conclusions seem clear. Free-market policies in education will not eliminate educational disadvantage; rather, they will exacerbate difference in access and outcomes. As Whitty *et al.* (1998:112 – 113) point out:

> There is a growing body of empirical evidence that, rather than benefiting the disadvantaged, the emphasis on parental choice and school autonomy is further disadvantaging those least able to compete in the market...For most disadvantaged groups, as opposed

> to the few individuals who escape from schools at the bottom of the status hierarchy, the new arrangements [in England] seem to be just a more sophisticated way of reproducing traditional distinctions between different types of school and the people who attend them.

In recent times, an emerging perspective on educational disadvantage which focuses on cultural difference rather than on any perceived deficit offers a more critical discourse for bringing about greater educational equality and social equity. The discourse of cultural difference provides a forum for educators to explore the embedded assumptions within educational thinking and to develop greater critical awareness of accepted values and hegemonic beliefs.

(c) *Cultural difference perspective*

More enlightened views of cultural diversity has shifted the emphasis in educational debates from deficit to difference, which has resulted in a growing acceptance of cultural difference as the primary cause of educational disadvantage (CMRS, 1992; Drudy and Lynch, 1993; Kellaghan *et al.* 1993; INTO, 1994). Within Irish education, the following definition provided by the Education Act (Irish Government, 1998: 32) indicates this awareness: '[Educational disadvantage is] ...the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools'. As such, it locates the causes of educational disadvantage within the social and economic structures affecting the child's life, and not within the individual child or family. In truth, the negative connotations associated with the term 'educational disadvantage' have become problematic in Irish educational discourse because the term is seen to further stigmatise schools and their communities.

From the cultural difference perspective, terms such as dissonance and discontinuity are used to explain the impediments to education experienced by children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. According to Conaty (2002: 17) 'this discontinuity or gap, which is psychological, social, spiritual and sometimes moral, is not sufficiently recognised in either educational theory or practice'. The 'difference' perspective examines the form of cultural capital valued by the school and by the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), and questions the language choices and the styles of teaching and thinking that are favoured (Tizard and Hughes, 1984). The

challenge, then, as Delpit (1988) indicates, is to create effective schools which practise and teach cultural translation, contributing simultaneously to the conservation of cultural diversity and the transformation of school cultures, while providing educational equity for all students.

Thus, the cultural difference standpoint attributes the cause of educational underachievement to discontinuities between home and school environments, such discontinuities being seen as differences rather than deficiencies. Lareau (1993) asserts that a cultural continuity between certain types of families and schools enhances the possibilities of their mutual influence and alignment. O'Sullivan (1994) is critical of 'culturally irrelevant' schooling and suggests that certain aspects of schools, such as codes of behaviour, the formal curriculum, expectations of pupils, and styles of speech, create a cultural discontinuity between home and school which causes pupils to disengage from the content and process of schooling. In an aptly named book, *Home Advantage*, Lareau (1993) contends that schools should neutralise, as much as possible, what Delpit (1988: 280) calls 'the language of power' in education. McCulloch (1998:5) supports this view, and contends that 'the mass provision of secondary education since the nineteenth century might well be seen as a succession of experiments conducted *de haut en bas* on other people's children'. He argues that these experiments have been inherently paternalistic in nature and speculative in terms of their outcomes, because they have been designed on the basis of assumptions about what would be best for the children of other people 'who inhabited in the main a different social world'.

Roberts' (1980, cited in Conaty, 2002: 48) suggestion from almost three decades ago is still worthy of consideration: 'rather than tinkering with the children's presenting culture, maybe we need to devote more effort to making teachers and curricula more responsive to working-class interests'. In a similar vein, Halpin (2003: 54) poses an interesting question: 'what would the school curriculum look like if its subject matter was chosen largely in terms of its contribution to helping children to live a full life rather than in relation to the short-term needs of the economy'? Halpin offers little in the way of ready-made solutions to the discouraging work experiences of many teachers. Instead, he focuses on ways of putting hope back into education and revitalising a 'sense of optimism and pro-activity among those schoolteachers whose

resolve about the job in hand is currently lower than they would wish it to be, and whose sense of vocation is being sorely tested as a result' (Halpin. 2003: 122). To this end, valuing the presenting culture and being aware of its access points would seem to be key factors in bridging the cultural gap between home, school and local community.

In summary, therefore, the cultural difference standpoint is based on the premise that a given environment fosters the development of competencies that have adaptive value for those individuals living in it (Clark, 1992). This happens, as Taylor (1980:17) points out, 'within a complex set of traditions, value assumptions and attitudes regarding the roles and relationships of family and society, individual and state'. In relation to this, Bronfenbrenner's (1974) socio-ecological model of children's learning (see chapter 1:15) stresses the importance of a holistic approach to child development and holds that school curricula should move from being child-centred to being family-centred. Similarly, the central approach of the Van Leer Foundation to human development (cited in Conaty 2002:44) is summed up as follows:

> The bond between parent and child should be the central pivot of educational activities...the community has to perceive a commitment to educational change, not for the benefit of the outsiders, but for itself and its children... Teachers, for their part, must know the cultural access point in the school community. If they do not, they run the grave risk of failing the child and the community they pretend to address.

In light of this, the Irish education system stands indicted by the works of numerous authors. Volumes of research indicate that social-class origins are the greatest predictor of academic school success or failure within the Irish education system and the main determinant of future location in the labour market (Drudy & Lynch, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Lynch, 1999; Clancy and Wall, 2000; Power, 2000; Skillbeck & Connell, 2000). Empirical evidence (Clancy and Wall, 2000; Combat Poverty Agency, 2001) informs us of the persisting link between class inequality and education, and makes clear that in Ireland only a small percentage of the poor and working class succeed within the educational system.

This focus on the cultural differences between home and school led some educators in the UK and the US to develop an increasingly political focus on education. Giroux and McLaren (1989), Richardson (1990), Apple (1996) and Whitty (1998) see a need for making the classroom into a way of politicising pupils. They argue that, since the dominant curriculum is kept in place by the advantaged middle classes, disadvantaged pupils must be taught to be critical of this curriculum and to appreciate their own culture and language. Other educators (Atkinson, 1994; Vincent, C. 1996; Decker *et al.,* 2000; Epstein *et al.* 2002) have been less political, focusing on community and social development initiatives as a means of changing the cultural bias of education and bringing about a system that is educationally fair. This thesis pursues the latter course and argues that the development of an educational partnership process in schools holds out many possibilities for improving social equity, educational equality and, ultimately, quality of life.

(III) Educational partnership discourse

This section examines the literature on aspects of educational theory and approaches that relate to the purpose, process and outcome of educational partnerships under the following five headings: defining educational partnership, politics of partnership, partnership as capacity-building, and implications for professionals and communities.

Defining educational partnership.

The word partnership 'implies a broad spectrum of ideas embracing equality, consensus, harmony and joint endeavour' (Vincent, 1996: 3). Educational partnership, therefore, may take a variety of forms and consists of different levels of involvement and participation, both in and out of school. It includes any activities which are provided and encouraged by the school and which empower parents to work on behalf of their children's education and development. Epstein (1996) extended this concept to encompass school-family-community partnerships, and stressed the importance of integrating these three influential contexts within every facet of children's learning and development. The term 'partnership', however, can mean different things in different systems and to different people. Three models of partnership, put forward by Epstein (2001), Westcott-Dodd and Konzal (2002) and Barbour *et al.* (1997), are examined here, and each indicates that partnership is not a set of fixed arrangements

but is best seen as a continually-evolving process which requires people to learn how to work together and value what each party brings to the relationship.

Epstein (2001:22) outlines the underlying belief systems which 'guide researchers and practitioners in their thinking' and maps the evolution of the concept of partnership by examining its different interpretations. The first interpretation, which emphasises the '*separate responsibilities of institutions*, stresses the inherent incompatibility, competition, and conflict between families and schools' (ibid,2001:22). The second interpretation, conversely, is based on an idea of the *shared responsibilities of institutions,* which 'emphasise[s] the coordination, cooperation and complementarity of schools and families and encourage communication and collaboration between institutions' (ibid, 2001:22). Central to the third interpretation is the concept of the *sequential responsibilities of institutions,* which 'emphasise[s] the critical stages of parents' and teachers' contributions to the child's development' (ibid, 2001:22).

These interpretations help stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of how power is shared, how decisions are made, and how resources are allocated within educational partnerships. Drawing on the findings of extensive research in this area, Epstein (2001:3) contends that:

> Teachers would like families to assist, guide and influence their children to do their schoolwork. Families wish teachers would let them know how to help their children at home. Students wish their families were knowledgeable about their school and helpful to them on school matters at home.

In relation to this, Epstein (2001:27) delineates a model of partnership in which three overlapping circles represent the three 'sites' of community, family, and school (see Figure 3.2, p. 71). In this illustration, there are areas which overlap and areas which are independent of the other sites. The extent to which these areas overlap 'is controlled by three forces: time, experience in families, and experiences in schools'. Time may refer to historical time or time relating to the age and class level of the individual. Forces that push the spheres together or pull them apart include experiences, philosophies, and practices across the three sites. The belief system operating within each site affects the pattern of interaction and communication between sites i.e. increasing or decreasing the overlap. Epstein (2001:29) maintains that, 'when teachers make parents part of their regular teaching practice, they create

greater overlap than would normally be expected'. Furthermore, she contends that 'when parents maintain or increase interest in their children's schooling' (ibid, 2001:29), more overlap between sites is created. This enhanced partnership translates into tangible benefits for the learner.

> The model of school, family and community partnerships locates the student at the centre ... if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard in the role of student, they are more likely to do their best to learn to read, write, calculate and learn other skills and talents and to remain in school (Epstein, 2001:404).

Epstein (2001) contends that, if there is more cooperation across contexts, students are more likely to receive common messages and this consistency will boost their resolve to stay in school and succeed in their educational endeavours.

Wescot-Dodd and Konzal (2002:24) present a similar conceptualisation of the interconnectedness of the key sites of home, school, and community. First, they present the traditional model, 'the old paradigm', in which the home, school and community are conceptualised as independent 'satellites' (ibid, 2002:26). This corresponds closely with Epstein's (2001:22) first perspective on partnership, 'separate responsibilities for families and schools'. Within the old paradigm, educators pose the question 'what can parents, community members and organisations do for us?' (ibid, 2001:25). Relationships are formal and are controlled by the school, and the emphasis is insular, allowing no opportunity for the development of personal relationships (ibid, 2002:26). In contrast, the 'new paradigm', the 'synergistic model, views home, school, and community as interdependent and collaborative' (ibid, 2002:125). It correlates closely with Epstein's (2001:22) second perspective on partnership, construed in terms of the 'shared responsibilities of families and schools'. Within this 'new paradigm', stakeholders seek the best means to work together to educate all children. Collaboration is paramount and all key stakeholders share responsibilities and resources within an ethos of partnership.

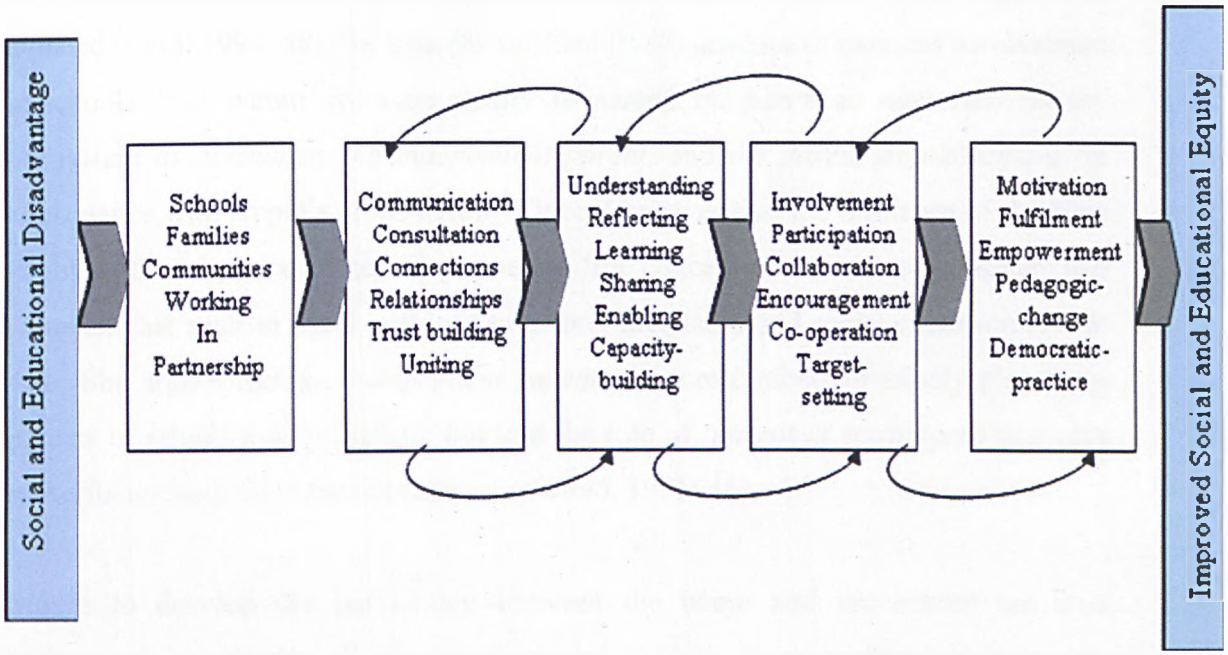
Barbour *et al.* (1997:325) conceptualise partnership as the means through which learners are supported in order to achieve their potential. They present a framework which facilitates interpretation of the level of interaction between the school and the home: 'minimum', 'associative' and 'decision-making'. At the 'minimum level' (ibid, 1997:326), school personnel seek support for school programmes through

assistance with homework assignments, and parents may also be invited to help with fundraising. They contend that this minimum level 'is common-place; it serves a definite purpose; and it is a good foundation from which to start working for more complete participation' (ibid, 1997:326). At the 'associative level', teachers may invite parents to become involved in helping in the classroom, to share skills or talents, to photocopy materials and to help on school trips. Children benefit from the involvement of adults at the associative level and, 'due to their school experience and intensified role, school expectations are much clearer to these parents, and all communication is facilitated' (ibid, 1997:327). Thirdly, at the 'decision-making level', there is a substantive shift in the nature of involvement when 'parents move beyond being committed advocates for their children into sharing responsibility for providing quality (school) education for their own and other children' (ibid, 1997:327). According to Barbour *et al.* (1997:327), working at the decision-making level 'requires mutual respect and a new definition of shared responsibility and accountability'. The three models briefly outlined here offer a general framework for understanding the nature of relationships in educationally-based partnerships.

In this connection, a trawl through government websites of most developed countries offers numerous examples, mainly central government initiatives, of educationally-based partnerships. On the UK government website (www.dfes.gov.uk), we read of *Beacon Schools, Specialist Schools, Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, Diversity Pathfinders, New Deal for Communities, Networked Learning Communities, Leadership Incentive Grant, 14-19 Learning Partnerships, Early Excellence in Early Years Partnerships, Advanced Skills Teachers Networks,* and so on. In Scotland, the *New Community Schools* (www.scotland.gov.uk/) promote education practice as democratic renewal. Similar examples are to be found on the website of the US Department of Education (www.ed.gov/), the most notable being *The Coalition of Essential Schools*. In addition, the periodical of the *Harvard Family Research Project* (www.hfrp.org) offers volumes of data on partnership projects throughout the US. Canadian (www.edu.gov.on.ca/) examples are *Literary Collaborative Initiatives, School Net, The Learning Partnership*, while in Australia (www.dest.gov.au/), we read of *Knowledge Building Communities.* These partnerships generally fit into three broad categories, those which are business/employment oriented, those which are service-delivery oriented, and those which are community-development oriented.

Similarly, in Ireland, there is a growing volume of research corroborating findings that the success of children in school is strongly influenced by the involvement of significant adults, such as parents, caregivers and other family members (Archer and Weir, 2005:10). Consequently, a range of schemes has been put in place over the past two decades to target educational disadvantage. Such schemes include the Early Start programme (targeting three year olds and their parents), Breaking the Cycle (reduced pupil-teacher ratio), the School Completion Programme (extra curricular activities) and Home-School-Community Liaison (promoting parental involvement and community development). Details of these schemes are available at (www.education.ie). The examples listed above provide many useful insights into some of the crucial factors involved in working in partnership. Despite the wealth of these examples, however, one must accept that replication or transplantation of a particular model may not always be suitable to the local setting. Drawing on these insights, I have attempted to design a conceptual model of partnership, illustrated below, which emphasises a more inclusive politics of education that would help advance community regeneration and revitalisation in neglected areas. In designing this model, I have attempted to represent the iterative stages of working within an educational partnership and to indicate the compound benefits at each stage.

A Conceptual Model for an Educational Partnership Process



In recent years, the term 'educational partnership' has become popular in an attempt to convey the importance of the symbiotic relationship of home, school and community in children's education. Yet our understandings of the term are not clear. Conaty (2002: 108) informs us that, as it is an emerging concept, the language is not yet fixed'. Models of partnership put forward by Pugh and De'Ath (1989) and Atkinson (1994) have been accepted by proponents of the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme in Ireland. The definition of partnership provided by Pugh and De'Ath (1989:68) incorporates concepts of equality, empowerment and transformation. They see partnership as 'a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect, and the willingness to negotiate'. This implies 'a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability' (ibid.1989: 68). Would such an approach 'allow for shared subjective meaning-making – and conscientisation – in relation to community membership, community selves and community identities' (Goodley and Lawthom, 2005: 148), and would this help in developing a shared understanding of the common good and our sense of equal worth as citizens?

In a similar vein, Atkinson (1994:58) speaks of 'a full-blooded partnership between home, school and the community in which each plays a positive role which acknowledges and involves the others'. He states that 'the good school will reflect, support and enhance the values and raison d'être of the social life in which it is situated' (ibid, 1994: 58). In Vincent's (1996:45-57) analysis of parental involvement in schools, four 'parent' roles are clearly delineated: *the parent as supporter/learner, the parent as consumer, the independent parent,* and *the parent as participant.* In consonance with Apple's (1989) view, Vincent believes that the influence of the New Right on the education system is promoting 'the concept of *parent-as-consumer* ' and contends that such an ethos will lead to greater inequality and social exclusion (1996: 43). She argues that the *independent parent* is the role most commonly played by parents of school-going children, but that the role of '*parent as participant* is a very powerful strategy for future development' (ibid. 1996: 45).

Moves to develop the partnership between the home and the school are now widespread in virtually all developed countries. Over the past two decades or so, governments, parents and the public have supported increased parental and

community involvement in children's education (OECD report, 1995b). Most of the research investigating the influence of family on students' achievement appears to support a positive conclusion (Coleman, 1991). Some researchers claim that the importance of parental involvement is now beyond dispute; 'when schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life' (Henderson & Berla, 1994: 1). Similarly, the National Parents Council (2004:4) in Ireland contends that 'partnership between the home and school is important, because with positive and active partnership the child gets the best that primary education can offer'. In the US, the National Education Goals Panel (1995: 13) stated that 'by the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children'. Epstein (1996: 213) asserts that 'we have moved from the question, *Are* families important for student success in school? to *If* families are important for children's development and school success, *how* can schools help all families conduct the activities that will benefit their children?'

Moving from rhetoric to reality is always a difficult process. The Irish Constitution (1938: article 42) states that 'parents are the prime and natural educators of children'. The questions arising for schools are difficult and complex: in what ways and to what extent can schools assist parents in fulfilling their role as the prime educators of their children? In this connection, issues of parents' rights, teachers' rights and children's rights come into play, as a new culture of democracy begins to emerge and a new understanding of professionalism evolves. Central to this new understanding of teacher professionalism is the concept of empowerment, which underpins a radically-altered relationship between the school and the families it serves.

Politics of partnership

Developing strategies through educational partnerships which lead to the empowerment of individuals and communities is a challenging undertaking. In doing so, proponents of educational partnership need to be 'armed with theoretical and practical knowledge of the social and interpersonal world' and be willing 'work alongside communities towards positive social change' (Goodley and Lawthom, 2005:136). According to Vincent (1996:7),

> [i]f empowerment is to retain any validity as a coherent concept, it might be better defined as a precursor of collective citizen participation: a process of setting in motion actions and attitudes that lead to groups of people, generally considered to have little access to state decision-making processes, acting collectively to change the conditions shaping their lives, and in addition improving their quality of life within those boundaries.

Clearly, the more a school becomes an integral part of the community it serves, the more possibilities it will provide for individual and group empowerment. The development of the principle of subsidiarity within schools would encourage educational professionals to share decision-making powers with parents and the broader community. This would create avenues for sharing the expertise of teachers' in relation to children's learning with parents and for allowing parents' feelings and opinions about school to be valued by teachers.

Developing a partnership approach to education, however, is a challenging and complex undertaking. The concept of 'equal partners' within an educational partnership is apt to cause a great deal of anxiety and much alarm amongst professionals. It is also apt to lead to much confusion with regard to the concepts of power, authority, leadership and empowerment. Conaty (2002:108) argues that 'equality does not imply that people come from a position of equal resource or power' and suggests that wider agreement might be found 'when partnership is described in terms of a definition of roles, together with an understanding of the inherent rights and responsibilities that accompany those roles' (ibid: 108). Healy (1992: 13) believes that equality implies that 'a relationship has been formed on a basis that recognises that each has an equally important contribution to make to the whole: contributions which will vary in nature, are compatible, and each of which is unique'. The complex power relationship between parents and teachers is best understood within the broader discourse relating to power and inequality in society as a whole.

The power imbalance obtaining between working class parents and educational professionals has long been acknowledged (Bastiani, 1987a; Tizard *et al.* 1988; Merrtens and Vass, 1993; Drudy and Lynch, 1993). Foucault (1980: 98, cited in Vincent, 1996: 7) argues that power operates at various levels within society and that individuals 'are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising

this power...Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application'. Home-school power relations are rooted in the discrepancy between the teacher's professional knowledge and the limited access of parents to those particular spheres of knowledge. According to Vincent (1996), this inequality is compounded by the cultural discontinuity between the home environment and the school environment in disadvantaged settings.

Vincent (1996) draws on the work of the Italian neo-Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, to explain how power is exercised through the institutions of civil society, such as the churches, the schools, political parties, trade unions and voluntary groups, and points out that participation in all these spheres is by consent, rather than by coercion. Gramsci (1971, cited in Vincent, 1996) claims that 'socially dominant groups endeavour to maintain control over other groups by gaining their 'active consent' to the status quo, a process he referred to as hegemony'. The hegemony of the dominant social group is exercised through the institutions of civil society, through the assumptions, values and beliefs propagated by the churches, schools and political parties, and so on. Carr (2003) contends that, within nineteenth-century political and social debates, social and educational reforms were seen as ways of combating the problems of social order and civil unrest which had been created by industrialisation and urbanisation. He argues that "the impetus for educational and social reform was not social change but social control" (Carr, 2003: 8).

Carr (2003) points to the negative legacy of such hegemonies, and argues that the nature and purpose of education are still strongly influenced by nineteenth-century assumptions and beliefs. Foucault (1977:41- 42, cited in Gordan, 1980) explains the insidious nature of such hegemonic influences:

> The conscious actions of many individuals daily contributes to maintaining and reproducing oppression, but those individuals are simply doing their jobs or living their lives, and they do not understand themselves as agents of oppression.

It should be noted that Gramscian theory allows for the possibility of 'space' within the educational system for working-class parents to challenge the hegemony of the system. Vincent (1996) contends that this would provide opportunities for parents to develop 'an oppositional logic' in relation to their children's education and their role

within it. Educational partnership, by its nature and structure, facilitates such a process. Improved democratic practices in schools give parents a voice and a sense of ownership of the school and the educational agenda which leads to the enhanced empowerment of communities.

Developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes that enhance mutual understanding would require all stakeholders to engage in a learning process that will equip them to recognise their common and separate aims, as well as their respective bodies of skills and knowledge. Would an educational partnership process afford such a learning environment? The ethos required to achieve this 'sense of social purposefulness' (Nixon 2006:151) would need to be in place throughout the school and the school environment. Sen (1999: 3) argues that "development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or over-activity of repressive states". Epstein (1993: ix) proposes that 'schools must inform and involve all families, including those with different cultural backgrounds, to gain their ideas and assistance in helping all children succeed in school'. Undoubtedly, such an approach would require a new perception of teacher professionalism and a major cultural shift that would require schools to become development hubs for the communities they serve.

Partnership as capacity building

The view that the school 'can be a powerful force for building parent capacity' (Cochran and Henderson, 1986: cited in Henderson and Berla, 1994: 46) firmly establishes the school within the context of the changing nature of society and promotes the symbiotic relationship between home and school. Of relevance here is Dewey's (1966:9) assertion about the impact of the social environment on the educative process; on his view, one of the biggest problems for the philosophy of education was that of 'keeping a proper balance between the informal and the formal, the incidental and intentional, modes of education'. He believed that schools had a function in creating 'a wider and better balanced environment than that by which the young would be likely, if left to themselves, to be influenced' (ibid, 1966: 22). He stressed the importance of the environment as an intermediary for the development of

attitudes and dispositions necessary to the continuous and progressive life of a society. Dewey's (1966: 22) belief that 'the deeper and more intimate educative formation of disposition comes, without conscious intent, as the young gradually partake of the activities of the various groups to which they may belong' points to the need for schools to engage in building community capacity.

Capacity building, understood both as a concept and as a strategy, is relevant for all communities and for society as a whole, but has particular application in relation to disadvantaged communities. The capacity building approach involves an acknowledgement that certain groups and communities have been, or are in danger of being, permanently alienated. In making this acknowledgement, it implicitly endorses the value of equal opportunity and the desirability of greater social equity. The concept of capacity building is predicated on the conviction that all communities have their own particular strengths, and that, consequently, the best approach to development is one initiated from the bottom up, which identifies its own needs and defines its desired outcomes, drawing on the community's own resources. A study of community building strategies, undertaken by Howe and Cleary (2001) for the Australian Government, contends that the emphasis on participation and on a more collaborative approach, not only reinforces the value of participatory democracy, but expands the meaning of democratic governance at all levels. Littlejohns and Thompson (2001) view community capacity as the degree to which a community can develop, implement and sustain actions which allow it to exert greater control over its physical, social, economic and cultural environments. This understanding counterbalances the 'deficit' perspective on disadvantage, discussed earlier, on which many past development programmes were based.

In relation to this, Gittell (1998: 239) asserts that 'twenty-first century reform requires a new paradigm, based on integration within the community through a revitalization of institutions and an enhancement of citizen roles'. Apple and Beane (1999: 3, cited in Nixon *et al.* 2001: 6) point out that this 'new paradigm' is merely a revitalisation of the concept of democracy and that, in order for schools to be truly democratic, they must be actively involved in establishing the following conditions:

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, which enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems and policies.
4. Concern for the welfare of others and 'the common good'.
5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
6. An understanding that democracy is not so much a 'deal' to be pursued as an ideal set of values that we must live by and which must guide our life as people.
7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.
(Beane and Apple, 1999:7)

Such a view of democracy would create conditions for 'life lived to the full: life at full stretch lived to capacity and realising the collective capacity of each individual to achieve her or his unique potential' (Nixon et al. 2001:6). While the main purpose of building community capacity might often be the achievement of specific outcomes, many practitioners and analysts argue that it is also a desirable end in itself because it contributes to the creation and maintenance of active citizenship and social trust. Collectively, the seven conditions outlined above would seem to be a prerequisite for a true and meaningful educational partnership. In this sense, community capacity building could be conceived both as a process and as an outcome, both a method of working and a value in and of itself.

Implicit in the concept of the 'community school' is the aim of fostering the ability of people to take greater control over their lives and environments by working together for common goals. Prime examples are the Children's Aid Society's (CAS) new community schools in the US. These schools, referred to as 'full-service schools' (Dryfoos, 1994:1) are jointly run by a partnership between the community school board and CAS and they offer a full range of support services for children and families, focusing in particular on community development. These schools act as community hubs which make available access to health, mental health and social services. Local control and parental involvement are significant aspects of these community schools. Dryfoos (1994) believes that it is possible to create new kinds of institutional relationships that will strengthen the educational system while maintaining its democratic traditions. In Scotland, the New Community Schools

(NCS) initiative adopted two main priorities 'the encouragement of inter-agency working at the level of service provision and the promotion of closer collaboration between schools and communities at the level of institutional delivery' (Nixon *et al.*, 2001). In the context of developments such as these, Young (2000, cited in Nixon *et al.,* 2002: 2) speaks of "deliberative democracy" and advances a belief in the collective wisdom of communities to solve their own problems. Such practice would provide 'the epistemic conditions for the collective knowledge of which proposals are most likely to promote results that are wise and just' (Young, 2000: 30, cited in Nixon *et al.* 2001: 2).

One might argue that there is no difference between the older concept of 'community development' and the newer concept of 'community capacity building', and that capacity building was always at the heart of good community development practices. Intrinsic to community capacity building, however, is the belief that 'interventions which take into account and build upon existing community capacities are more likely to be successful in accomplishing desired change than those which are adopted in a more traditional top-down manner' (Littlejohns and Thompson 2001: 37). Interventions of the former type promote democratic practices, in which the importance of local identity, local leadership and local knowledge are recognised as critical components. Implicit in this approach is a belief that solutions to problems are best developed and implemented by those closest to the problem, and that in so doing sustainable strategies are more likely to be put in place.

In Ireland, attempts to bring about improvements for communities experiencing disadvantage have traditionally relied on needs-oriented assessments of community development. In recent years, however, greater attention has been paid to asset-based approaches to community development, as an alternative to the needs-based approach. An asset-based approach focuses more on the community's capacities, talents and assets as a base for community development, and rests on the principle that recognising the strengths, talents and assets of a community inspires positive action for change which can uncover hidden resources within communities. Much of the literature on asset-based approaches to community development, referred to as ABCD by Mathie and Cunningham (2002), comes from the United States, but this approach

has been in place in Ireland for over a decade under the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL).

The HSCL scheme accepts that community capacity development is likely to be a slow process which requires that schools adopt a radically different view of the education process. Two of the aims of this scheme read as follows:

- 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.

This scheme operates in all primary and secondary schools throughout the country which are designated as 'disadvantaged', and much positive work has been done in developing parent, pupil and teacher capacity to work together in partnership. While acknowledging the long-term nature of its aims, proponents of the HSCL scheme believe that, by developing strong relationships between families, schools and communities, underprivileged parents can be empowered, communities strengthened, and the cycle of poverty broken.

It should be noted that the concept of building community capacity is not a new concept. Even in the early 1900s, Dewey (cited in Cruz, 1987), believing that schools in America were not performing their full functions, worked to place them at the centre of community life.

> What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy (Dewey, 1943:7).

Dewey (1943) believed that society can only be true to itself by being true to the full development of all the individuals who make it up. Almost a century later, research literature in the US is pointing to this same basic truth as the way forward in education:

> A measurable segment of the society is not going to 'make it' without massive changes in the way that they are educated, supported and cared for. Families and schools cannot fulfil their obligations without immediate and intensive transformation. New

> kinds of arrangements of community resources have to be brought together to ensure that children can grow up to be responsible, productive, and fully participating members of this society (Dryfoos, 1994: 27).

Research in UK draws similar conclusions. Atkinson (1994:2) advises that 'fresh, more robust and meaningful ways of organising schools, communal and political life must be rapidly constructed if serious problems are to be avoided'. In exploring the revitalisation of communities, he contends that all attempts are likely to fail, no matter how well-funded or well-intentioned, if they do not involve people from within these communities. He states that 'success depends on key elements from within the communities being in the driving seat, setting the agenda and taking a direct part in the redevelopment process' (Atkinson, 1994:37). If we accept that educational disadvantage is the result of a complex interaction of deep-seated economic, social and educational factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), it is logical to assume that the best models of practice in combating it are programmes that take these influencing factors into account. Such an approach to children's education can be located in Dewey's (1974) theories of progressive education, in which he emphasises the importance of incorporating the student's past experiences into the classroom. Recognition of the quality of these experiences, whether in the school, in the home, or in the community, was a key element in the development of Dewey's progressivism. Such experiences provide a basis for students to reflect on the past, work through the present and prepare for the future.

Progressive educators have for a long time promoted the notion of parental empowerment as a strategy for educational reform within the 'struggle to resuscitate the public sphere of public education' (Fine, 1993:683). Regrettably, in western culture, the majority of people are apt to look at education from an individualistic point of view. Is it plausible that individualism and socialism could co-exist harmoniously within an educational partnership process? Would a partnership model hold out the promise of a more productive family-school relationship, resulting in family empowerment, school effectiveness, and individual success for all students? A true educational partnership might view school as a place not just for children, but also for entire families, and this would be linked closely to other educational agencies in the community. Could such a partnership operate with a common mission, mutual

goals and a shared decision-making process which would include representatives of the schools, parents associations and community agencies? The rationale for educational partnership is premised on the promotion of democratic values and practices, in that it 'allow[s] parents and citizens to participate in the governing of public institutions and to have the deciding voice in how children are to be educated' (Henderson and Berla, 1994: 19).

This theme is re-echoed by Atkinson (1994), who believes that, 'when a school is good, it merely becomes a natural, interlinked, interdependent extension of the informal process of education in the community'. He sees good education in schools as 'merely formalised informal education' and contends that 'a good school is necessarily a community school'. He warns that 'the long-held tenet that a teacher merely acts in *loco parentis* is ignored at our peril' (Atkinson, 1994:57). He places community education at the very core of the educational process, and views the community as having a sense of ownership over and pride in the school. He believes that a school cannot function properly unless the whole school becomes an extension of the life of that community. In this regard, Vygotskian theory offers a forum for debate on the merits of basing the curriculum firmly in the presenting culture.

Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theory, generally known as social constructivism, emphasises the construction of an agreed-upon socially-constructed reality and asserts that the child's culture endows the child with the cognitive tools needed for development. This belief points to the importance of the social context for cognitive development. According to Daniels (1996: 48), Vygotsky's best known concept, the idea of the 'zone of proximal development', implies that students can, with help from those who are more advanced, master ideas and concepts that they cannot understand on their own. This must surely be a serious consideration for curricular planning. The cognitive tools needed for development within a particular culture are passed on informally to the younger generation by parents and other adults. Therefore, school learning should occur in a meaningful context, and should not be separated from informal learning. The tools the culture provides a child with include cultural history, social context and language, and therefore out-of-school experiences should be related to the child's school experience. A central tenet of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Daniels, 1996: 147-149) is that learning and development are social,

collaborative activities which actively involve teachers and other significant adults in the child's learning.

Daniels (1996) informs us that social constructivism emphasises the sphere of social interaction as a basis for knowledge construction and holds that experience, both socially-oriented and object-oriented, is a primary catalyst for knowledge construction. He quotes from Voloshinov (1926: 105, cited in Daniels, 1996:210), who believed that the linguistic act 'is born, lives and dies in the process of social interaction. Its form and meaning are determined basically by the form and character of this interaction'. Thus, social experience provides the activity upon which the mind operates. In addition, knowledge construction is enhanced when the experience is authentic. In this connection, social interaction provides for the development of socially-relevant skills and knowledge, by relating new knowledge to prior knowledge, in the construction of which the learner plays an active role. This activity involves the mental manipulation and self-organisation of experience, and requires that students regulate their own cognitive functions, mediate new meanings in relation to existing knowledge, and form an awareness of current knowledge structures.

The role of the teacher, therefore, is to guide students to an awareness of the relevance of their experiences and socially agreed-upon meanings. This understanding of the teacher as a guide is very different from that of the teacher as instructor. Instead of being a conduit through which knowledge is transmitted, the teacher's role is to motivate, facilitate, discuss, provide examples, and to support and challenge. In this sense, social constructivists believe that a student's understanding and adaptability is increased when he /she is able to examine an experience from multiple perspectives. These perspectives provide the student with a greater opportunity to develop a more viable model of their own experiences and social interactions.

In summary, social constructivist theory emphasises that knowledge serves an adaptive function. If knowledge is to enhance one's adaptation and functioning, then the knowledge attained must be relevant to the individual's current situation, understanding, and goal. The relevance of this knowledge is likely to lead to an increase in motivation, as the individual comes to understand the need for certain knowledge. Ultimately, experience with relevant tasks will provide the individual

with the mental processes, social information, and personal experiences necessary for enhanced functioning within his or her practical environment.

For almost a century, Dewey's (1916: 18) insights have drawn attention to the environment as a dominant influence on children's education. He asserts that 'social environment forms the mental and emotional disposition of behaviour in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences' (Dewey, 1916: 18). On the basis of this, he explains that the bulk of a child's vocabulary is formed in the home, not as a set means of instruction, but as a social necessity. Relating this to schooling, he points out that conscious teaching can hardly do more than 'convey second-hand information as to what others think' (ibid, 1916: 18), while the socially-constructed knowledge of the home is often ignored or de-valued. The individual's ability to transfer the results of learning affects his ability to adapt to a new environment. When homes and schools operate according to different standards of training and expectations, children will experience difficulties in moving from home to school. This suggests that teachers need to be familiar with the home environments of their pupils, and that parents need to be familiar with the school environment.

Traditionally, schools operated as independent units and there was little connection between the school and life outside of school, or with how people engage with one another or their environment. In relation to this, Miller (2007) believes that educational practitioners need to develop a more holistic approach to teaching and learning. He points out that the focus of holistic education is on relationships and connections. A holistic approach to curriculum nurtures the student as someone who is connected with the community. Dewey (1943: 9) argued that '[n]ot knowledge or information, but self-realisation, is the goal. To possess all the world of knowledge and lose one's own self is as awful a fate in education as in religion'. It should be noted that the concept of holistic education informed the Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999:11):

> It recognises, too, the integrated nature of knowledge and thought and stresses the connections in content in the different curriculum areas. This creates harmony in the child's learning experiences and serves the complex nature of the learning process.

Under such conditions, students develop a deeper appreciation of the interconnectedness of the school and the community, and this promotes a sense of caring and responsibility for and within this community. Engaging in collaborative and co-operative learning with the wider community gives children's education a broader and richer perspective within a natural setting. It links the school, not just with the local community, but also with the global community. It allows students to tackle problems, adventures, and challenges rooted in real life situations which are both interesting and satisfying in terms of the result of their studies. Such an approach to children's education, however, would require a construction of teacher identity and professionalism which is very different from this role as it has traditionally been understood.

Implications for professionals and communities

It can be argued that teacher professionalism is a socially-constructed concept and will therefore have different interpretations in different social contexts and in different time periods. Here we examine the definition of teacher professionalism in the context of a partnership approach to education in deprived communities. Expanding the role of teachers to meet the social needs of children and their families would require a radical approach which would institutionalise change so that it becomes an integral part of the educational structure. Expanding the role of the teacher is based on accepting that teachers have the ability to adapt teaching practices and methods to particular pupils and different age groups, drawing on their theoretical understanding of learning, their knowledge of curriculum content and their knowledge of what pupils need. This professional knowledge and understanding changes and develops over time through the teacher's own experience and other forms of professional development.

In order to ensure the relevance of what is being taught, the teaching profession needs to gain knowledge about the complex and compelling forces which influence daily living in a changing world. Ongoing in-service for teachers which would update and upgrade professional skills, paying particular attention to the problems of working with disaffected communities, must surely be an essential priority. Dewey (1943) believed that teachers should pursue ongoing systematic inquiry in order to produce sound conclusions about their practice. A process of reflective practice enables

teachers continually to improve their professional practice. Professionalism therefore implies a responsibility to the continued development of practical knowledge through reflection and interaction, and a commitment to reviewing the nature and effectiveness of practice and to an increased understanding of the purposes and content of education, individually and collectively.

In this context, the profession has a responsibility to demystify professional work and to develop relationships of trust with all concerned. This change of emphasis would, undoubtedly, affect and colour the professional identity of teachers. Nixon *et al.* (1997) speak of the pedagogical implications of this understanding of professionalism in terms of what they call 'a pedagogy of recognition', and argue that such understandings require

> new forms of agreement-making that seek to reinforce (a) the primacy of the relation between the professionals and their publics and (b) the need to ground that relation in an ongoing dialogue regarding the ends and purposes of learning (Nixon and Ranson, 1997:4).

Hence, it can be argued that the profession has a responsibility to initiate debate about policy and practice and to speak with authority on issues of social justice and the role of education. Such a development requires broad support from both employers and professional communities at school level, and a greater level of community democracy than currently exists.

As Touraine (1997) reminds us, democracy relates, not only to the political level, but also to the interpersonal level, to daily interactions in schools, in work organisations and in the public domain. Similarly, Glickman (1998) promotes the concept of community democracy as a process that would increase the participation and engagement of communities in their own development and claims that society is largely improved by how citizens live in terms of their everyday personal interactions. This concept is encapsulated in Dewey's vision of democracy (cited in Cruz, 1987) as a way of life, a democracy which must be won repeatedly and maintained and not seen as a fixed state. Democracy needs citizens who are both autonomous and socially aware. Dewey (1966) viewed politics as the duty and work of each individual in the course of their daily lives. Viewed as such, it can stimulate, organise and link value

development and norm development. He views the formation of the mind as a communal process, and believes that the skills and knowledge that students learn in schools should be integrated fully into their lives as persons, as citizens and as human beings. He contends that the concept of the individual is only meaningful when the individual is regarded as an inextricable part of his or her society, and argues that society has no meaning apart from its realisation in the lives of its individual members.

As a concept, community democracy resonates strongly with those who find value in the personal ways in which people help each other. Glickman (1998: 49) asserts that 'the essence of a community and participatory democracy is an educative belief about how citizens best learn'. He contends that, in order to improve education for all students, school leadership must practise the rhetoric of community and participatory democracy in all aspects of school life. He describes this type of democracy as 'a means to decision-making (shared governance) to achieve the ends of an education for students that helps them to achieve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' (Glickman, 1998: 49). He believes that developing a democratic pedagogy in schools constitutes a powerful form of student learning which advances equality for all, consideration of individual freedom and respect for authority. Such a culture would play an important part in the identity development of students. Hence, he poses a challenging question for schools: "Are we willing to practise a form of democracy in our everyday actions in schools that makes possible a societal form of democracy that we have not yet reached"? This type of democratic leadership in schools is described by Sergiovanni (1998: 38) as 'pedagogical leadership' and by Spillane *et al.* (2001) as 'distributed leadership'.

Glickman (1998) stresses the importance of a sharing of leadership, power and authority in the interests of bringing about sustainable, democratic change. In this sense, Sergiovanni (1998: 38) proposes a 'pedagogical leadership' which would focus on capacity building by developing social and academic capital for students and by developing intellectual and professional capital for teachers. He states that 'pedagogical leadership develops capital by helping schools become caring, focussed and inquiring communities within which teachers work together as members of communities of practice' (ibid.1998:38). He believes that good schools take

collegiality seriously and strive to create a single practice of teaching in the school which is shared by many teachers. In so doing, they embody their roles in the following key tasks: "purposing, maintaining harmony, institutionalising values, motivating, problem solving, managing, explaining, enabling, modelling, and supervising" (Sergiovanni, 1998: 41-42).

Spillane *et al.* (2001) highlight the desirability of distributing leadership within schools. School leadership is conceptualised as an evolving web of influence stretched over the entire building, with some people leading from formal positions of authority, and others by virtue of how their peers perceive them. They concede that distributed leadership looks different in different schools, depending on their respective situations. It even varies within schools, over time, and across subject areas. They argue that the conventional view of leadership often works against distributed leadership by putting so much of the onus for accountability on principals. Spillane *et al.* (2001) contend that transformational leaders delegate authority and are strategic about developing subsidiarity within the school through distributed leadership models. This would result in power being exercised at the lowest possible level and in the devolution of responsibility for services to the lowest practicable level at which they can be discharged efficiently and effectively. As such, subsidiarity can be seen as a guiding principle in redesigning educational institutions to allow for greater participation in the education process by parents, by teachers, by students, and by the wider community.

The principle of subsidiarity was central to Dewey's (1916) assertion that individuals would not come to understand themselves as democratic citizens simply by learning about democracy. They would only do so by being part of a democratic community in which the ends and purposes of communal life are formulated through collective discussion and rationale debate. Nixon *et al.* (2002) argue in favour of developing community participation in terms of a rationale put forward by Nielson and Beykont (1997, cited in Nixon et al., 2002:7), which is referred to as "the Community-Oriented Model (or Theory C)". This model of change suggests that

- Management starts with the needs of the periphery rather than the goals of the center.
- It focuses on strengthening value-knowledge rather than producing and distributing products
- It responds directly and flexibly to different needs rather than by uniform regulation (Cummings, 1997: 217, cited in Nixon *et al.*, 2002: 7).

Developing community participation along these lines would require 'a fundamental re-ordering of existing systems and priorities' (Nixon *et al.*, 2002: 7). If education is to contribute to a genuinely democratic society, 'which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms' (Dewey.1916:99), 'schooling would itself [need to] become a democratically organised form of communal life' (Carr, 1991:184). Only under such conditions will students 'acquire those qualities of mind and social attitudes which are the prerequisite of a genuinely democratic society' (Carr, 1991: 185). It is, as Nixon insists (2004:251), 'only from within our own academic practice that we can discover the virtuous dispositions of courage and compassion to set about that task'. The kind of society we want to have is a fundamental question in educational debate, and it challenges academic practitioners and educational researchers 'to reclaim a public and inclusive language for education that reflects the moral ends and purposes of academic practice' (Nixon, 2004: 245).

Conclusion

This chapter interrogated the literature on social inclusion, educational disadvantage and educational partnership. The relationship between social and educational disadvantage was examined with reference to the works of authorities in these fields. Following from this, the evolution of thinking about educational disadvantage was outlined from three perspectives: the residual (deficit) perspective, the dominant (free market) perspective and the emergent (difference) perspective. Against this backdrop, the value of schools, families and communities working closely together in educationally-based partnerships was discussed in detail. The politics of working in partnership were explored in relation to models of best practice, both nationally and internationally, and these were discussed in relation to their impacts on communities and their implications for professionals. As pointed out earlier, this study set out to explore the potential of such educationally-based partnerships in primary school

communities in Ireland which are experiencing educational disadvantage, and in so doing it aims to construct partnership pedagogies appropriate to these settings. The next chapter outlines and explains the methodologies employed to achieve this purpose.

Chapter 3

Methodological Framework

Introduction

The nest of concentric circles below offers an overview of the methodological framework which guided this study. The methodologies employed were threefold: (1) a participatory ethnographic approach to the collection of data, (2) a grounded theory approach to the interpretation of this data and (3) a multi-vocal narrative approach to the representation of findings.

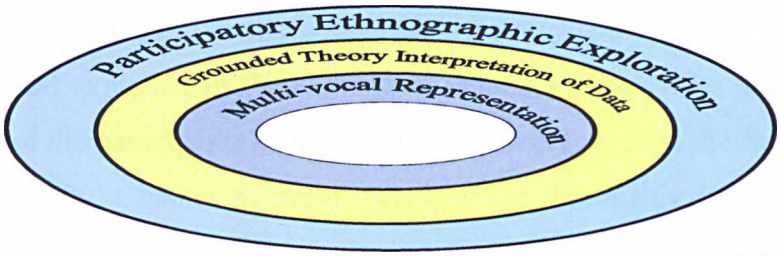


Figure 3.1: Methodological Framework Model

The structure of this chapter falls into four sections under the following headings: (I) the study's purpose, (II) the study's objectives, (III) the research rationale and (IV) the research design. Section one outlines the main purpose of the study, as expressed through four core research questions designed to search for a better understanding of educational partnerships in disadvantaged settings. In section two, the objectives of the study are outlined and conceptualised with the aid of a Venn diagram which illustrates the overarching influences of family, school and community on children's learning. The third section outlines and justifies the methodological approach of the study, with reference to existing theories in the field of ethnographic and grounded theory studies. The fourth section explains the study's design and outlines the process through which the data was gathered, analysed, interpreted and presented.

(I) The study's purpose

The purpose this study was to explore the potential of educational partnership as a mechanism to bring about greater educational equality, enhanced social capital for

school communities and improved academic achievement for students. The study set out to examine the nature and processes of educational partnership, as well as its benefits and outcomes for the families, schools and local communities in which the FSCEP project operated. The core research questions may be summed up as follows:

1. What were the benefits and outcomes for the schools, families and local communities of working in educational partnership?
2. What made the educational partnership process work well?
3. What prevented it from working well?
4. What models of partnership were most appropriate to the five participating schools?

Throughout the four upcoming chapters which provide the data analysis, questions 1, 2, 3 and 4 above are addressed intermittently in discussions concerning the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study. These questions are addressed both tacitly and explicitly in the descriptive passages of activities and events and in the voices of the participants of the partnership programmes in the five schools. In Part 3 of this study, Chapter 8, these questions are thoroughly interrogated and each is responded to separately. Numerous conclusions are drawn from the discussions and interpretations of findings, and these are evaluated in relation to established theories outlined in the literature chapter. As question 4 follows logically from questions 1, 2 and 3 - and is, in one sense, a product of the conclusions drawn from the first three questions - it required extra space and attention in the 'Conclusions' chapter.

As the research took place within school communities which were experiencing levels of educational disadvantage, the study also set out to gain a better understanding of the nature and causes of this enduring phenomenon. Bronfenbrenner (1986: 723-742) explains that educational disadvantage stems from a complex interaction of deep-seated social, economic and educational factors, resulting in lower academic attainment for some students. Similarly, Kellaghan *et al.* (1999) inform us that a wide range of variables are used to indicate the presence of educational disadvantage. These variables range from those that are thought to have a causal relationship with disadvantage, such as poverty, to those that might be thought of as the effects of disadvantage, such as low educational achievement. By means of an ethnographic exploration of educational partnership programmes operating in five participating primary schools, this study endeavoured to develop a deeper appreciation of how socio-economic disadvantage affects children's educational attainment.

In conducting this research, there was a need for an overlap between the domains of social science and education in the search for new insights about educational disadvantage. To this end, the study set out to examine school culture and teachers' perceptions of their role as professionals within the context of their work in educationally disadvantaged settings. In conjunction, the study set out to capture the views and perceptions of parents and other community members about their reciprocal roles within an educational partnership process, and to explore the impact of the process on the whole school community. An underlying purpose of the study, therefore, was to bring added benefit to the five school communities through a participatory exploration of working in partnership which would enhance personal growth and improve social capital. In undergoing this process, it was hoped to that models of good practice would be developed which would be of interest to educational practitioners, community development workers, parents' groups, and to the wider educational and research communities.

(II) The study's objectives

The primary objective of this study was to develop better a understanding of the complexities of an educational partnership process in the five primary schools which participated in this study. Exploiting the opportunity provided by the FSCEP project, this research set out to gain insights into the dynamics at play in family-school-community relationships, and to explore the variables which allow an educational partnership to work well or hinder it from doing so. The study hoped to monitor the effects of improved family-school-community relationships and interactions on children's education and its impact on the local community. The significance of this study is underpinned by national and international findings in the field of educational and social disadvantage. The literature reveals that the relationship between the home and the school plays a central role in creating advantage or disadvantage for children at school (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; CMRS, 1992; Kellaghan *et al.*, 1993; Tormey, 2003). A core strategy for addressing educational disadvantage, therefore, is the development of a partnership model of education between families, schools and communities that would develop their reciprocal capacities and shared understanding of working together in children's education. Thus, one of the main objectives of the study was to gain a better understanding of which partnership models might be most appropriate for the participating schools and,

in so doing, to examine the possible links between an educational partnership process in the schools and the development of social capital within those school communities. To this end, the study of relationships and capacity building were key objectives of the research.

The main thrust of these objectives is conceptualised below with the aid of a Venn diagram. This visual representation of the research quest summarises these research objectives. The diagram shows three overlapping circles, which represent the family, the school, and the community, respectively. Epstein (1987a: 130) refers to these circles as the 'overlapping spheres of influence' on a child's development and argues that the best learning environment exists when the zone in the middle of the three overlapping circles is optimised. According to Epstein (1995: 702), the overlapping of school and family can produce 'family-like schools' and 'school-like families'. In this sense, 'family-like schools' have an accepting, caring and inclusive atmosphere that is welcoming to all families. To achieve this, Epstein (1995: 703) suggests that 'the language used by a school to identify students, families, and educators should take on a family concept'. For example, rather than using the word 'students', schools should use the word 'children' because it suggests an extension of the family. In addition, schools should take into account the realities of family life and be able to recognize each child's individuality and special traits. Similarly, the concept of 'school-like families' emphasizes the importance of school, homework, and learning activities for the children.

Epstein's (1995) model is depicted as spheres that can, by design, be pushed together or pulled apart by practices and interpersonal forces in each environment. One of the principal objectives of this study was to explore the variables which cause this zone to increase or decrease and to examine its impact on the learning environment of the school and its effects on the social development of the community. The mechanism through which this exploration took place was provided by a variety of partnership activity programmes (Appendix 1), which were implemented by the FSCEP project in five primary schools over a four-year period. My position as coordinator of these programmes afforded many opportunities to be a participant-observer in the partnership process.

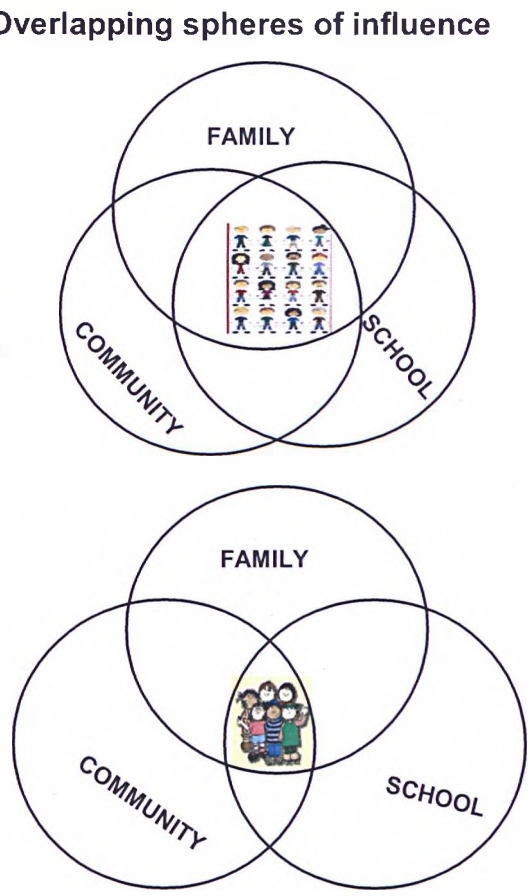


Figure 3.2: Three overlapping spheres of influence

This research study set out to explore the ways in which schools can be instrumental in building parent capacity in relation to their children's education, and to monitor the impact of this on the development of community capacity. Cochran and Henderson (1986, cited in Henderson and Berla, 1994:46) contend that 'the school can be a powerful force for building parent capacity'. In relation to this, a number of questions needed examination. Firstly, would a greater and more intensive overlap of family-school-community interactions encourage a broader range of families to engage with school activities? Secondly, would the process of increasing the overlap ensure that the school community had developed a greater clarity of purpose with regard to the children's education? Thirdly, would such a process bring added clarity to the respective roles of schools, families and communities in working in partnership? Finally, to what extent would this result in improved social capital for these communities? In addressing these questions, the study aimed to explore existing school cultures and to interrogate teachers' understandings of their evolving

professional identities as agents of change in a rapidly changing society. In this sense, the ultimate objective of the study was to construct partnership pedagogies that might inform the future direction of teaching and learning in disadvantaged contexts.

(III) Research rationale

The research objectives of this inquiry required a deep appreciation of the nature and processes of social and educational disadvantage. Burgess (1984:3) contends that prominence must be given to 'understanding the actions of participants on the basis of their active experience of the world and the ways in which their actions arise from and reflect back on experience'. Similarly, Allan (1991) advises that, rather than assume that world-views are already known, we need to acknowledge that much has to be learned before the right questions can be posed. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out that it is frequently during the course of conducting the research that one discovers what the research is really about. Conscious of my own strong convictions with regard to educational partnership, I endeavoured to keep the investigation open-ended and sensitive to unanticipated features, to assume relatively little and to remain alert to the explanations of events supplied by the participants involved. In this regard, Silverman (2001) alerts us to the preoccupation that exists with theories of *how* things come about and suggests that researchers need to focus more on *why* things happen. Thus, hearing the voice of all who participated in the partnership activities and remaining faithful to that voice was a central tenet of this study and required continuous deliberation and self-scrutiny.

The ability to recognise the tendency towards bias was something I had grappled with from the start of the study. My experiences with the FSCEP project over a four-year period were very positive and confirmed my belief that an educational partnership process would provide compound benefits for all the stakeholders in children's education. I believe that such an approach to education has huge potential for combating educational disadvantage and for revitalising the school's role in building community capacity. The need to prove the veracity of these convictions, both to myself and to those with whom I work, may very well have coloured my perspective on educational partnership, but many voices in the upcoming chapters have endorsed

this viewpoint. In this regard, much attention was given to personal reflexivity and every effort was made to represent these voices as accurately as possible.

Researcher Reflexivity

Post-structural theory has raised many questions about a researcher's ability to construct and represent the findings of an ethnographic investigation. The validity of representation and the complexities of what it means to do qualitative research are fundamental issues in post-structuralist debates surrounding the issue of qualitative data analysis at a time when our 'epistemological foundations have been shaken by a general loss of faith in received stories about the nature of representation' (Geertz, 1988:135, cited in Pillow, 2003). Pillow (2003) looks at how reflexivity is being defined and examines its role as a methodological tool. She points to the distinction drawn by Chiseri-Strater (1996; 130) between reflexivity and reflection: 'to be reflective does not demand an 'other', while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny'. Such a focus requires the researcher to be critically conscious of how his/her position and interests influence all stages of the research work. As Callaway (1992:33) puts it, '[reflexivity] becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness'. It involves drawing a distinction between the reflective practitioner and the critical theorist (Carr, 1991). It also draws attention to the role played by the subjectivity of the researcher in the research process, and acknowledges that the way in which knowledge is acquired and constructed is relevant to the claims made by the research. This gives rise to ethical issues for the researcher, because an ethnographic study is both a process and a product - a product with the potential to influence future outcomes for the subjects of the research.

Hammersley (1992) outlines three methodological principles which are used to provide the rationale for the specific features of the ethnographic method. He summarizes these under the headings *naturalism, understanding* and *discovery,* and sees them as a more credible means of capturing the true nature of human social behaviour. He derides quantitative research methods which reify social phenomena by treating them as more clearly defined and static than they are, or by viewing them as mechanical products of social and psychological factors. By its nature, an ethnographic study 'aims to describe and interpret human behaviour within a certain

culture; [it] uses extensive fieldwork and participant observation, aiming to develop rapport and empathy with the people studied' (Wellington and Szczerbinski, 2007: 218). Because they represent fundamentally different claims about the nature of human behaviour and the best ways of coming to understand it, it is important to understand the ways in which ethnographic approaches differ from other approaches.

The FSCEP project provided a forum for a listening and learning approach through which I endeavoured to remain open to the ideas and opinions of others. Planning, developing and implementing educational partnership activities afforded many opportunities for a deep immersion in the culture of the school communities. Building and maintaining close personal relationships with all participants was crucial to this work. Tedlock (2001: 456) points to the importance of developing close links with the research participants:

> Whenever it (ethnographic approach) has been adopted, a key assumption has been that by entering into a close and relatively prolonged interaction with people (one's own or others) in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of their subjects than they can by using any other approach.

Furthermore, the process of engagement with parents, staff members and students fostered reflexive practices amongst all participants, which resulted in new forms of agreement-making in the collaborative planning and implementation of the FSCEP programmes. Goodley (2006:4) informs us that

> ethnographers are challenged to work together with participants in order to develop shared subjective understandings of a given culture, breaking down power relationships between the researchers and the 'researched'.

It is important to remember, therefore, that human beings exist in multiple strata of reality which are organised in different ways, and that 'these positionings are different for each individual, as well as for each culture that ethnographers come into contact with as field-workers' (Tedlock, 2001:471). Consequently, the rationale for adopting the research approach employed in this study was premised on the assertion that these multiple realities are socially constructed and that the best approach is to acknowledge the reciprocity of the learning experience and to adopt a 'learning together' mode of operating.

Participatory Ethnography

The ongoing nature of field experiences connects personal experiences with new areas of knowledge, hence the importance of adopting a reflexive approach to the investigative process. According to Tedlock (2001: 458), participatory ethnography 'empowers consultants by allowing them to choose the topics of inquiry, the way of learning, and even the manner of writing essays or a book about the knowledge and experience shared'. She suggests that one method of counter-balancing the author's bias would be to encourage the subjects of the ethnographic study to become co-authors of the ethnography. Tedlock (2001:471) states that, in the presentation of the knowledge generated, 'an ethnographer can allow both self and other to appear together within a single narrative that carries a multiplicity of dialoguing voices'. In representing the findings of this study, I endeavoured, within the time and space allowed, to adhere to these principles and guidelines.

In planning and implementing the various activity programmes for the FSCEP project I had the assistance and support of a wide range of parents, teachers and community members in each of the five schools. As a result, a core group of enthusiastic supporters became established in each school. Every opportunity to bring these core groups on board as fellow researchers was utilised, at formal meetings and in incidental conversations and discussions. My role as a researcher was made clear from the start, and assurances were given on matters of confidentiality and sensitivity. The participation of these core groups was wholehearted and supportive. I explained that a draft summary document of the research findings would be available to them on request. This was accomplished by circulating a bullet-point account of the findings to all adult interviewees. Some availed of this opportunity and returned very useful feedback. This provided a forum for further discussion and reflexivity. It was from members of these core groups in each of the five schools that I requested formal interviews, because these participants had immersed themselves fully in the educational partnership process and had expressed a willingness to participate in interviews. The student interviewees, on the other hand, were randomly selected by the school principals from groups that had engaged in partnership activities in their own classrooms. Consequently, the findings of this study are to a great extent presented in a 'multi-vocal' format, which allows the participants who experienced the partnership activities at first hand to speak for themselves. Macbeth (2001:35)

points out that 'reflexivity is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself'. In this regard Tedlock (2001) points to the ethical considerations in the representation of ethnographic research. She believes that ethnographers' lives are 'embedded within their field experiences in such a way that all their interactions involve moral choices' (Tedlock, 2001: 455).

Ethical Considerations

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) remind us that the paramount responsibility of the qualitative researcher is to those he or she studies. The Council of the American Anthropological Association provides ethical principles which address the ethical issues faced by qualitative researchers in the course of their work. My work in co-ordinating the FSCEP project had put me in close contact over a number of years with many families who experience various forms of deprivation and disadvantage in their everyday lives. This had allowed for close, trusting relationships to develop over time. To betray this trust in any way would be highly unethical and totally anathema to my way of working. Since ethnographic research takes place among real human beings, there are a number of special ethical concerns to be aware of before beginning. Firstly, researchers must make their research goals clear to the members of the community where they undertake their research and gain their informed consent. Cohen and Manion (1994:350) speak about the importance of obtaining informed consent from participants and point out 'consent arises from the subject's right to freedom and self-determination'.

In this regard, principal teachers in all five schools made it clear that all student interviews were dependent on the provision of consent from the children and their parents. A second ethical concern relates to issues of confidentiality. It was made clear to all participants that any identifiable accounts or descriptions would be avoided in reporting the findings. As pointed out by Pole and Lampard (2002:277), researchers should 'strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy'. A third consideration relates to the sensitivity of the language used in the reports. One of the most important considerations for researchers is to ensure that the research does not harm or exploit those who participate in the research. Consequently, every effort was made to safeguard the rights of individuals

interviewed and to protect the honour and dignity of those studied during the course of the research. The need for sensitivity to the privacy of participants is highlighted by Cohen and Manion, who speak of the 'the cost-benefit ratio' (1994:347) which exists in most social research. They state that researchers are ethically required to 'consider the likely social benefits of their endeavours against the personal costs to the individuals taking part' (1994:348). This admonition was adopted as a guiding principle during the process of analysis and in writing up the final report for this thesis.

To protect participants' identities and retain their right to anonymity and confidentiality, a series of codes were developed in presenting the data. Each school was assigned a capital letter and each teacher a number. Teachers' quotations are referenced in the upcoming chapters by using an assigned capital letter for each school, followed by a capital T, followed by the teacher's number on the staff seniority list, e.g., BT9, DT14, and so on. Similarly, parents' quotations are referenced by using the capital letter of the school, followed by a capital P, followed by an assigned number, e.g., BP4, CP7, and so on. Children's quotations were referenced by using the school letter, followed by the letter P, followed by an assigned number, e.g., EC3, AC6, and so on. In similar fashion, programme facilitators were referenced using the letter of the school in which they delivered the programme, followed by the letter F, followed by an assigned number. An interview with one community development worker was referenced in similar fashion.

A further ethical consideration required attention during this research. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the implications of research studies involving children. All schools in Ireland have been issued with a copy of *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Irish Government, 1999). These guidelines embody the principles contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and offer a comprehensive framework to assist professionals and other persons who have contact with children. In all five schools in which the partnership activities took place, the welfare of the children was of paramount importance, and, consequently, due deference was paid to the *Children First* guidelines throughout the course of the FSCEP project. For example, children's photographs were not used in FSCEP newsletters and were only exhibited with

parental consent. With regard to child interviewees, all interviews were conducted with groups of children and all took place in appropriate sites on school premises and were overseen by school principals.

Ethical considerations in relation to my own position as FSCEP coordinator also required due deliberation, since I held a position of power within the school communities as the mediating agent of their funding applications. The temptation to focus on the high visibility aspects of the partnership process was evident from time to time in the schools, and this also affected my expectations with regard to the tangible outcomes of working in partnership. A high degree of visibility of parents in and around the school buildings was, for me, a rewarding sight, as it seemed to indicate a degree of success in the partnership programmes. Allied to this, regular progress reports to the funding agency required statistical data, with regard to the number of parents participating in each school as well as detailed descriptions of activities undertaken. Thus, the temptation to focus on *end products,* rather than on the *process* through which they came about, was an ever-present pitfall. Consequently, my own ideologies and assumptions required a great deal of self-reflection and openness during the research process and in writing up the report. Hence, establishing the authenticity of my findings and conclusions deserves some attention.

Authenticity

Within research communities, naturalistic inquiry is sometimes accused of not meeting the rigorous criteria associated with traditional paradigms of quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba (2007: 18-20) delineate two separate and distinct criteria for determining the reliability and authenticity of findings in naturalistic inquiry. These are referred to as 'parallel criteria of trustworthiness' and 'unique criteria of authenticity'. In terms of the 'criteria of trustworthiness', they put forward 'credibility as an analog to internal validity, transferability as an analog to external validity, dependability as an analog to reliability, and confirmability as an analog to objectivity' . In relation to the 'criteria of authenticity', Lincoln and Guba (2007:20) believe that all participants 'should be empowered in some fashion at the conclusion of an evaluation, and all ideologies should have an equal chance of expression in the

process of negotiating recommendations'. They describe four distinct criteria of authentication: ontological authentication, educative authentication, catalytic authentication and tactical authenticity, and view these authenticity criteria as part of an inductive, grounded and creative process that 'springs from immersion with naturalistic ontology, epistemology, and methodology' (Lincoln and Guba, 2007: 24).

In this respect, I became increasingly aware that ethnographic research and analysis make specific demands on the researcher. As Strauss and Corbin point out, the qualitative analyst requires the following skills:

- The ability to step back and critically analyse situations
- The ability to recognize the tendency towards bias
- The ability to think abstractly
- The ability to be flexible and open to helpful criticism
- Sensitivity to the words and actions of respondents
- A sense of absorption and devotion to the work process.

(Strauss and Corbin, 1998:7)

As pointed out above, this study set out to gain a deeper insight into, and understanding of, the factors contributing to, and the barriers to working in partnership in five primary school settings. My role in this process might fairly be described as both emic and etic, and my personal experiences with the FSCEP project over a number of years have undoubtedly influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data. Co-ordinating the various activity programmes for the project has been a great learning curve for me and a rich source of accumulated knowledge. Such 'accumulated knowledge' is seen by Dey (1993:63) as a resource on which the researcher can draw; for him, 'the issue is not whether to use existing knowledge, but how'. Similarly, Lincoln and Guba (1985:116) assert that 'no inquirer ought to go about the business of inquiry without being clear about just what paradigm informs and guides his or her approach'. They contend that questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, as these guide the inquirer in ontologically fundamental ways. The knowledge acquired through implementing the partnership activities, combined with an increased understanding of educational research issues gained through my Ed. D. course, informed the research design and analytic process of this study.

(IV) Research design

The research design for this study followed a three-stage model outlined by Pole and Lampard (2002:190-191), as (a) preliminary (b) processual and (c) summative. The preliminary stage relates to the initial study design and pre-field work, while the processual stage relates to the 'continued engagement with the data as it is collected' (ibid, 2002:190). Finally, the summative stage is the stage at which final conclusions are drawn and recommendations offered. According to Pole and Lampard this final stage is dependent on the success of the preliminary and processual stages, and 'the purpose of qualitative data analysis is to construct a conceptual framework by which the researcher can make sense of the social world he/she is studying' (ibid, 2002:204). As humans, we search for meaning and so the quest for understanding and knowledge drives the process of analysis and interpretation from the beginning of a study.

(a) *Preliminary stage*

The preliminary stage of the research included personal observation and close participation over a three-year period through the implementation of partnership activities in the five schools participating in the FSCEP project. Even though this was not a formal research process in the early stages, much valuable knowledge was accumulated during this time through informal discussion and in the course of dealing with the practical realities of the job. Over the course of time, I had found it useful to jot down my observations, experiences, insights and feelings with regard to the task of implementing the partnership programmes. These notes recorded practical issues relating to time, space, facilities and funding, and also difficulties relating to the structure and process of bringing about true partnership in the schools. Reflecting on the ways in which the interactions took place and relationships were built up was beneficial to my work and was helpful in clarifying my thinking on a range of partnership issues. Many of these issues were less tangible, and ranged from individuals' views on the purpose of education to opinions about the development of community capacity.

With the progression of my doctoral study, a clearer focus on my research topic began to emerge, and I began to record my observations and insights about the partnership process in a more systematic way in a reflective journal. Knowing what my research topic was going to be focused my attention from an early stage on what research

methodologies might be best suited to the collection of data, and this in turn made lectures during the residential weekends at the University of Sheffield more relevant and more focused. During this time, I had been reading a wide range of literature related to educational partnership and educational research and this served as a useful foundation for the processual stage.

(b) Processual stage

Pole and Lampard (2002:190) use the term 'processual stage' to describe the stage during which most of the fieldwork takes place. For this study, the formal data-gathering processes took place during the school year of '07/'08, as outlined in the following table.

October/November 2007	10 reflective journals (Appendix 2)
February/March 2008	10 reflective journals
April 2008	63 questionnaires (Appendix 3)
May 2008	1 focus group (N=25)
May/June 2008	14 interviews (Appendix 4 – Parents) (Appendix 5 – Children) (Appendix 6 -- Teachers)

Figure 3.3: Data gathering table

Four distinct research methods were used during this stage: reflective journals, a questionnaire, a large focus group, and, finally, individual interviews. Twenty research journals were compiled over two six-week periods by participating teachers. This took place during the autumn of 2007, when ten teachers, two from each school, volunteered to record their thoughts and feelings, over a six week period, in relation to the partnership activities they had organised in their respective classrooms. These were returned to me for initial analysis prior to the Christmas holiday break. During the spring of 2008, the same cohort of teachers completed a second batch of journals over another six-week period, but this time in relation to a different activity. I analysed the second batch of journals in March 2008 and so began the process of

sharpening the focus of the study. This ongoing analysis and review of the data guided the interview process at a later stage. As well as providing a rich source of data on their own, these journals were an extremely useful aid in designing a questionnaire for all staff members in each of the five schools. The questionnaire template was designed with assistance from two principals and was piloted with the assistance of three teacher colleagues who were very supportive of the FSCEP project.

These questionnaires were hand-delivered to all the staff members in each school during April 2008, and were returned to me within a week or two. The use of the survey had three advantages. Firstly, it provided a comprehensive quantitative base for the research project, by including the entire teaching staff in all five schools. Secondly, it facilitated anonymous responses, whereby teachers could convey their feelings without fear of offence and, as such, it permitted greater levels of honesty than face-to-face interviews might allow. Thirdly, it was amenable to analysis on the SPSS (software package for the social sciences) computer package, which would help to expedite the analysis process within the time constraints of the study. An initial analysis of the survey findings helped to inform the content and format of the focus-group session and, later, the individual interviews.

As well as being an extremely busy stage, the processual stage was for me a dynamic and reflective phase in which teachers actively engaged with me in the analysis process through dialogue and exchange of ideas. Silverman (2005:149) advocates simultaneous data collection and analysis as good practice within the field of qualitative research. Similarly, Pole and Lampard (2002:209) advocate simultaneous data collection and analysis as 'an integral aspect of the research process' which fosters ongoing reflective practice. Quinn Patton (2002: 436) observes that 'in the course of fieldwork, ideas about directions for analysis will occur'. In this study, clarity gradually emerged during the fieldwork stage about the three themes used in the data analysis. These themes related to, firstly, the personal growth and development experienced by participants in the FSCEP project, secondly, the capacity-building opportunities promoted through the partnership activities, and, thirdly, the institutional barriers that posed impediments to the progress of true partnership in the schools.

In May 2008, prior to conducting any interviews, an opportunity presented itself for conducting a focus group session. The FSCEP management team felt that it would be beneficial for the project if a general meeting between some of the core people involved in the activities in the three urban settings took place. This meeting was attended by parents and teachers from three different school communities and also by some community activists and some members of school governance. With the assistance of two members of the FSCEP management team, I arranged the attendees into mixed groups comprised of parents, teachers, members of boards of management and community workers. The objective of this exercise was to elicit their views on the core research questions:

1. What were the benefits and outcomes for the schools, families and local communities of working in educational partnership?
2. What made the educational partnership process work well?
3. What prevented it from working well?
4. What models of partnership were most appropriate to the five participating schools?

Approximately ten minutes were allocated to each question, at the end of which I facilitated a response from each group in turn. This focus group session provided a broad base of views on the questions posed, which were recorded on a flipchart by a participating teacher. Afterwards I discussed the recordings with this teacher, and this was very helpful in writing up an accurate report of what had been said. This was later incorporated into the thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

The focus group was also useful in guiding my approach to the final stage of data collection, that of formal interviewing. My first task was to prepare three semi-structured interview templates for parents, pupils and teachers respectively. My ambition at this stage was to complete all field-work before the end of the school year. So, during the months of May and June 2008, fourteen formal interviews took place in the schools. The principals in all five schools were extremely helpful in assisting with the interview arrangements and in providing facilities in the schools. These interviews were broken down as follows: five interviews with teachers (two individual and three group interviews), five interviews with parents (one individual and four group interviews), three group interviews with children (nine to twelve year olds), and, finally, one interview with a local Community Development Officer. This was an unstructured interview which focused on how this particular community worker saw

her role within the educational partnership process that we were attempting to put in place in that community. The views of other community workers were also heard during the focus-group session mentioned above.

The interviews resulted in approximately twenty hours of very rich data. While I was open to the emergence of further themes, I was also interested to see in what ways the interviews would crystallise the themes which had emerged from the journals, the survey and the focus group session. I used a small audio cassette recorder to record each interview and shortly afterwards I transferred each one onto the annotape package (a computer-aided analysis package) on my laptop. Quinn Patton (2002:384) notes the importance of the post-interview stage, stating that it is a 'critical time of reflection and elaboration. It is a time of quality control to guarantee that the data obtained will be useful, reliable, and authentic'. In transferring the data from cassette to laptop, it was necessary to use a microphone and this necessitated listening to the entire recordings for a second time. The annotape system is convenient when working with large amounts of data. Silverman (2005:197) contends that computer-aided analysis 'supports the code and retrieve operations of grounded theorising'. However, while the annotape system is helpful in analysing the data, it is important to remember that the hidden, non-verbal messages which are often integral to the intended interpretation cannot be retrieved. With this in mind, I recorded observations concerning the non-verbal messages in an interview journal I had prepared for purposes of labelling and indexing the interview schedule, and I referred to them when listening to each interview. During the summative stage, however, it became necessary to refer back to a number of interviewees for further clarification on points raised in their interviews.

(c) Summative stage

The third and final phase of Pole and Lampard's (2002:192) framework, summative analysis, is the stage at which final conclusions are drawn from the research, enabling the researcher to 'make sense of the collected data and to advance explanations and understandings of the social phenomena to which they relate'. On re-assessing the gathered data, I was concerned at an apparent imbalance in favour of schools and teachers vis-à-vis parents and community workers. So I thought it might help to redress this lack of balance if the parent interviews and the community worker

interview were transcribed and scrutinised in greater detail. Having the data in printed form provided another means of familiarising myself with it and, in doing this, I followed the following steps suggested by Winter (2008: October residential):

1. Data preparation – transcribing, labelling, indexing, etc.
2. Photocopying – using copies only and keeping originals safe
3. Close reading – reading through transcripts several times, annotating and thinking about possible themes or categories
4. Considering themes or categories – (a) pre-categories (related to research questions) and (b) emergent categories (the surprises that come out of the data)
5. Allocating data to themes or categories – using different colours might be helpful
6. Linking to previous findings/literature – making connections and comparisons
7. Choosing representative quotations and remaining impartial

As explained previously, the process of gathering and analysing data for this study was an ongoing exercise carried out over a considerable period of time. The sequential phases of analysis of this data, outlined above, provided a form of triangulation that was used to 'map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour, by studying it from more than one standpoint and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data' (Cohen *et al.* 2000:112). The sequence began by getting an overview of the entire process and, bit by bit, assembling the raw materials. Ultimately, of course, analysis goes beyond management and the counting of data, and is essentially a cognitive process which involves 'creativity, intellectual discipline, analytical rigor, and a great deal of hard work' (Quinn Patton, 2002:442).

While analysis and interpretation are closely intertwined, they are conceptually separate processes. Analysis is the process of bringing order to the data and organising what has been gathered into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units (Huberman and Miles, 1984, in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 428-429). Interpretation, on the other hand, involves attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions (Denzin, 1994: 500-501). The researcher's role, therefore, moves along a continuum of activity between sorting out the raw data to interpreting its meanings. In selecting quotations from the data, the researcher is challenged to remain faithful to the essence of what the interviewees were attempting to convey. In this regard, it should be noted that, during the course of an interview, meanings are conveyed in many ways. Finding the appropriate language to

communicate effectively can sometimes present a barrier, and interviewers must grapple with this while remaining aware of the pitfalls of guiding the interviewee. In this respect, the representation of the voice of interviewees clearly demands careful consideration, scrupulous analysis, and serious moral deliberation (Denzin, 1994: 503). Denzin highlight the difficulties involved in such undertakings:

> Confronted with a mountain of impressions, documents, and field notes, the qualitative researcher faces the difficult and challenging task of making sense of what has been learned. I call making sense of what has been learned the art of interpretation (Denzin, 1994:500).

This dilemma in relation to the analysis of the data presented itself at an early stage. How could I remain faithful to the common-sense theory emerging from the journals and from my own observations and conversations, while at the same time attempting to filter it through existing theories in the literature? What new knowledge and understanding could be gleaned from my study?

To this end I felt it was important to refresh my knowledge of grounded theory, so as to ensure that local, common-sense theory would emerge from the research process. According to Charmaz, the methods involved in generating grounded theory

> ... consist of flexible strategies for focusing and expediting qualitative data collection and analysis. These methods provide a set of inductive steps that successively lead the researcher from studying concrete realities to rendering a conceptual understanding of them (2003: 311).

It is through this conceptual understanding that the contribution of participants to the development of new knowledge produced in virtue of the insights extracted from the research process and gleaned from the experiences and wisdom of the research participants can be acknowledged. However, these results and findings must be mediated through the researcher's sympathetic and sensitive engagement with participants, which allows them to see that their experiences are valued, validated, and understood.

Glasser and Strauss define grounded theory as 'the discovery of theory from data' (1967:1), characterised by 'an inductive approach to collecting and analysing qualitative data that seriously attempted to be faithful to the understandings,

interpretations, intentions and perspectives of the people studied' (Clarke:2005:3). In similar fashion, Quinn Patton (2002:454) emphasises the need for the researcher to become 'immersed in the data ... so that embedded meanings and relationships can emerge', while Pole and Lampard (2002:206) advocate 'an intimate relationship between the researcher and the data'.

Charmaz (2006: 178) endorses this approach and argues that 'the strength of grounded theory methods lies in their flexibility and [that] one must engage the method to make this flexibility real'. She asserts that grounded theory has 'been packed with multiple meanings, but also fraught by numerous misunderstandings and complicated by competing versions' (2006:177). However, Charmaz proposes that all variants of grounded theory have the following characteristics in common:

- Simultaneous data collection and analysis
- Pursuit of emerging themes through early data analysis
- Discovery of basic social processes within the data
- Inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize these processes
- Sampling to refine the categories through comparative processes
- Integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions, and consequences of studied processes.

(Charmaz, 2003:313).

In this study, the stages of data gathering and analysis were, to a large extent, concurrent, continuous and spread over a lengthy period of time. The sequence of events which made up the study allowed the characteristics of grounded theory outlined above to be incorporated into the analysis process.

Charmaz (2003) explains that two distinctive forms of grounded theory have arisen within the field, constructivist and objectivist. The constructivist approach sees data and analysis as 'created from the shared experiences of researcher and participants'. According to this understanding, the methods used function as 'tools for learning' (Charmaz, 2003:313). In this study, the inductive construction of abstract categories allowed certain broad themes to emerge in relation to the development of the partnership process. Through a process of continual dialogue and exchange of ideas, these themes became more clearly defined and acquired more terminological accuracy: Theme A: Educational partnership and personal growth; Theme B:

Educational partnership and capacity building; and Theme C: Educational partnership, its challenges and barriers. These themes were employed in the framework for the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data provided in the upcoming chapters.

Reporting on this qualitative study required a lengthy description of the programmes and of the experiences of the people involved. The purpose of this description was to let the reader know what happened in the environment under observation and what it was like from the participants' point of view. In representing events that arose during the partnership activities, every effort was made to provide as full and accurate an account as possible. In some instances, entire activities are reported in detail in little vignettes, because they represented typical experiences and captured the essence of what the FSCEP project was about. Some of these descriptions are written in narrative form to provide a more holistic picture of what had taken place. I hope that my representation of events, experiences and feelings has provided a balanced report in relation to findings and conclusions.

The vast array of data gathered during the course of this research presented a dilemma with regard to what should be included and what had to be omitted. In considering what to omit, difficult decisions had to be made about how much description to include. As detailed descriptions and in-depth quotations are essential qualities of qualitative accounts, it is hoped that sufficient description and direct quotations are included in this report to allow the reader to understand fully the research context and the thoughts of the people represented in the study. The descriptive passages are evenly balanced by analysis and interpretation and supported with numerous direct quotations in an attempt to present an interesting and readable account of the experiences and feelings of the research participants.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the purpose and objectives of this study and outlined the rationale for choosing both the broad ethnographic approach and the grounded theory approach. A detailed description of the study design was presented and justified as the most appropriate methodology for gaining a better understanding of what a true

educational partnership might look like in primary schools in disadvantaged settings. The structure and process of the methodologies used were informed and substantiated by reference to the works of some of the leading authorities in these fields.. The operational techniques supporting the authenticity and reliability of the study's findings were discussed in respect of the ethical, ontological and epistemological issues that arose during the course of the data gathering and analysis. Perceived limitations of the study with regard to the selection of interviewees who were wholeheartedly supportive of the partnership activities was justified in relation to the study's objective of constructing partnership pedagogies that might help inform future directions in education in Irish primary schools.

This ends Part 1 of this thesis. Part 2, which deals with the analysis and interpretation of data and findings, is presented in the upcoming chapters: chapters four, five, six and seven. Chapter four presents the quantitative findings of the study's survey of teacher's attitudes and feelings towards the partnership activities in their schools, while chapters five, six and seven present an analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data in terms of the three themes outlined above.

Part 2

Part 2 of this study is divided into four chapters and presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study. Chapter 4 presents the quantitative findings yielded by a comprehensive survey of the entire teaching staff of the five schools in which this research took place. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the qualitative findings generated on the basis of data gathered through participant observation, twenty research journals, one large-scale focus group and fourteen individual and group interviews. Three broad themes emerged from analysis of the first batch of teacher journals, and these themes were used as an analytical framework for discussing and interpreting all data, both quantitative and qualitative. These themes were later summarised more concisely as follows: Theme A – Educational Partnership and Personal Growth; Theme B – Educational Partnership and Capacity Building; and Theme C – Educational Partnership, its Challenges and Barriers. Theme A is examined in Chapter 5, Theme B in Chapter 6, and Theme C in Chapter 7.

Chapter 4

Quantitative Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the quantitative data gathered in all five schools through the use of a multiple-choice questionnaire. The purpose of the survey was to obtain an overview of teachers' opinions, beliefs and observations with regard to working in partnership with parents and the wider community through the FSCEP programmes in their schools. Analysis and interpretation of this survey provided a platform upon which to develop an appraisal of teachers' understanding of the home-school-community dynamic and its impact on the personal growth and capacity development of participants, as experienced in the FSCEP partnership programmes. The survey also drew attention to some of the barriers to the implementation of educational partnership and its outcomes, both cultural and structural. As pointed out in the preceding chapter, during the preliminary analysis of the data, three themes began to emerge from the teacher journals and from incidental discussions with participants. As the analysis process developed, these themes became the framework through which all data, both quantitative and qualitative, was analysed. Thus, the quantitative analysis is presented here under themes A, B, and C: Educational partnership and personal growth; Educational partnership and capacity building; and Educational partnership, its challengers and barriers.

Methodology

In April 2008, a largely quantitative questionnaire was distributed to all teachers and principals (N=63) in the five participating schools. Fifty-one questionnaires were completed in all, a significant response of over 80%. All questionnaires were returned anonymously. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to collate, organise and analyse the quantitative data gathered. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-six items in total, the first two of which were categorical variables requiring 'yes or no' answers. Twenty-four of the items were individual statements which respondents were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement by marking the relevant box [Strongly Agree (1) to Strongly Disagree (5)]. At the end of the questionnaire, an

open-ended section invited general comments to facilitate further clarification of responses to the preceding statements.

Findings

In the case of the two categorical variables, teachers were asked about the nature of their participation, i.e., whether they had been part of whole-school activities or individual class activities. Obviously, the whole-school activities might also include those teachers who had organised individual class activities. As illustrated in Figure 1, a high percentage of respondents (80.5%) had participated in whole-school activities. These activities included Christmas concerts, summer shows, St. Patrick's Day parade activities, whole-school literacy projects, and various fieldtrips.

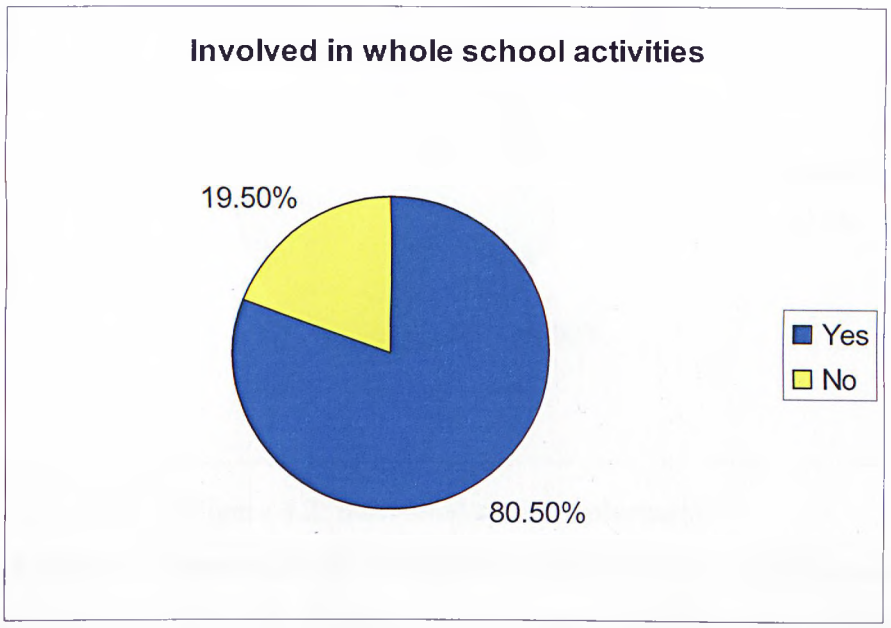


Figure 4.1: Whole-school involvement

As pointed out above, a high proportion of teachers who engaged in whole-school activities also designed their own individual class activities. Figure 2 illustrates that 75.5% of respondents were involved in individual activity programmes in their own classrooms. These activities involved the presence of parents and guardians in the classrooms engaging in shared-reading programmes, maths-games programmes, music programmes, dance and performance activities, mime and movement activities and various art/craft activities, as well as outdoor activities, such as sports, gardening, school grounds enhancement, equestrian experiences, sea-shore and workplace

experiences, and so on. Obviously, many of these activities necessitated taking the class group on trips to various venues.

The second categorical variable showed that three quarters of the overall staff of all five schools had participated in partnership programmes with their own individual class groups. This percentage is hardly surprising, given that the teaching staffs in these five schools volunteered to participate in the FSCEP project, having fully understood what was required and expected of them.

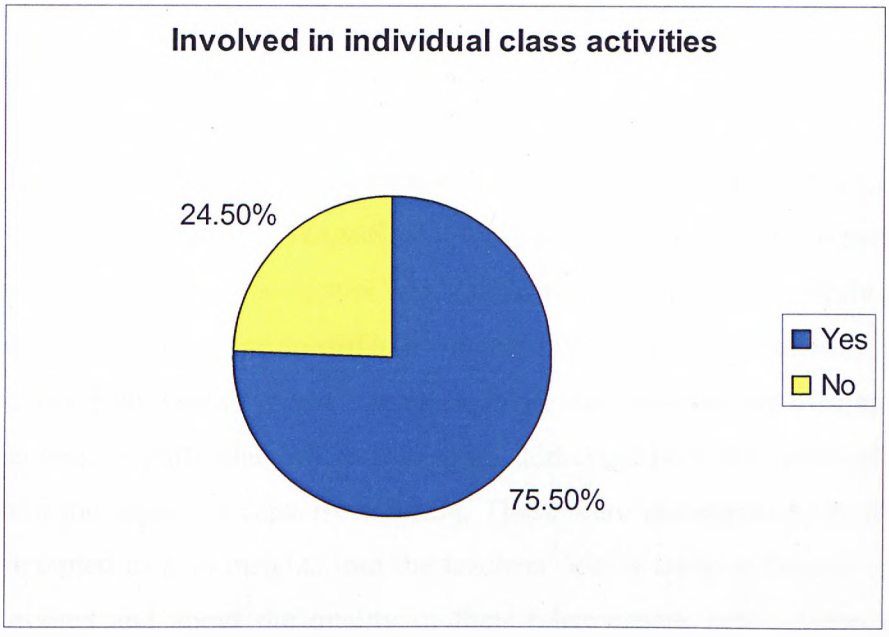


Figure 4.2: Individual class involvement

For this reason the responses are only applicable to the schools in question and cannot be seen as representative of the feelings of other school staffs, however similar other school experiences may appear to be. Consequently, the willingness and co-operation demonstrated by the teaching staffs of these schools from the inception of the FSCEP project was an influencing factor in deciding the tenor of the statements of the survey, which were mainly framed positively.

The survey sought an overview of the impact of the partnership programmes on teachers, parents, children and the wider community through a wide array of statements, many of which were similar in theme, although each had a unique and individual focus. To facilitate ease of reading, analysis of these statements does not follow the order in which the statements appeared on the questionnaire. Instead, the

presentation of findings corresponds with the emergent qualitative finding themes, as explained earlier. Two of these themes related to the positive outcomes of working in partnership and the development of social capital. The third theme elicited teachers' opinions about what they perceived as challenges and barriers to the implementation of educational partnership in their schools.

Hence, the following list of statements in the questionnaire were analysed under Theme A (Statements 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 14, 18, 20, and 21). These statements sought to elicit the teachers' views about the impact of the FSCEP project on the personal growth of teachers, parents, children and community members which took place in virtue of their participation in the partnership activities.

Under Theme B, the following list of statements 4,5,7, 9,10,12,13,14,18, 21,23 and 24 elicited teachers' views on the capacity-building potential of the FSCEP programmes for all participants and on the factors which influenced this potential. While a number of the statements were open to different interpretations and, consequently, could be classed under both Theme A and Theme B, there was considerable overlap between four statements in particular, which statements addressed both the aspect of personal growth and the aspect of capacity-building. These were statements 5, 9, 14 and 21, which attempted to gain insights into the teachers' views about reflective practice in the classrooms and about the quality of their relationships with parents and with children.

The remainder of the statements were analysed under Theme C (Statements 6, 8, 11, 15, 16, 17, 22 and 24). These statements elicited teachers' opinions in relation to challenges and barriers to implementing partnership activities in their schools, and sought an understanding of teachers' attitudes and structural impediments to working in partnership. As stated above, the statements were, in the main, positively framed, and so the interpretation of the responses focuses on the reverse of the response in order to obtain the negative views of teachers concerning these issues.

The SPSS analysis of the fifty-one completed questionnaires is outlined and discussed in the following sections under the headings of Themes A, B and C outlined above.

Educational partnership and personal growth

An overview of teachers' feelings and observations about the extent to which the partnership programmes facilitated and fostered personal growth was elicited through the following statements in the questionnaire:

(1)>> As a teacher in this school, I welcome FSCEP's intervention activities in the school.

(2)>>The FSCEP activities have helped me to develop a deeper appreciation of educational partnership.

(3)>>FSCEP has helped me to become more aware of the value of parental involvement.

(5)>>The action-research element in the project was of benefit to me.

(9)>>FSCEP raised awareness of *complementary learning* and consequently I offer more interactive homework.

(14)>>The FSCEP activities enhanced teachers' relationships with parents.

(18)>>FSCEP increased my interactions with parents and families.

(20)>>Children's attendance and behaviour improved because of FSCEP activities.

(21)>>Better pupil/teacher relationships have resulted from FSCEP activities.

The overall attitude of the school staff towards working in partnership with parents in supporting their children's learning was elicited through statements 1, 2, 3. 98% of the teaching staff of all five schools responded favourably to the FSCEP intervention activities in their schools. 88% believed that their involvement with the partnership activities had given them a deeper appreciation of the concept of educational partnership, while 82% indicated that the FSCEP project had raised their awareness of the value of involving parents in their children's learning.

Statement 5 elicited views on teacher reflexivity in regard to working closely with parents and the local communities, to which 58% indicated in their response that the action-research element of the project, namely, journal-keeping during the course of an activity programme, was beneficial to them. Teachers who had not co-ordinated individual class activities were not requested to keep journals and as a result 29% of teachers gave a non-committal response, while a further 13% gave a negative response to this statement. Statements 14 and 18 sought insights into teachers' relationships with parents and families. In response to these statements, almost four-

fifths (78%) of teachers indicated an increase in interactions with parents and families as a result of the FSCEP programmes. 13% provided a non-committal response and 9% felt that FSCEP activities had not increased parent-teacher interactions. This may be an indication of high levels of parent-teacher interactions in some schools prior to the advent of the FSCEP project. While one cannot equate parent-teacher interactions with relationships, it is reasonable to infer that they are closely linked. Consequently, 84% of respondents indicated that the FSCEP activities had enhanced their relationships with parents, while 1% of respondents indicated that the project had not changed teacher-parent relationships in their schools and a remaining 14% provided a non-committal response.

Statement 20 explored links between the FSCEP activities and children's attendance and behaviour. Students' enthusiasm for attending partnership activities was seen by school principals as an important growth point for some pupils. However, the statistics were somewhat inconclusive in relation to this statement, with 40% believing that there was an improvement in the children's attendance and engagement which could be attributed to the FSCEP activities. However, 14% disagreed with this and a further 42% of the valid return registered a 'Don't Know' response.

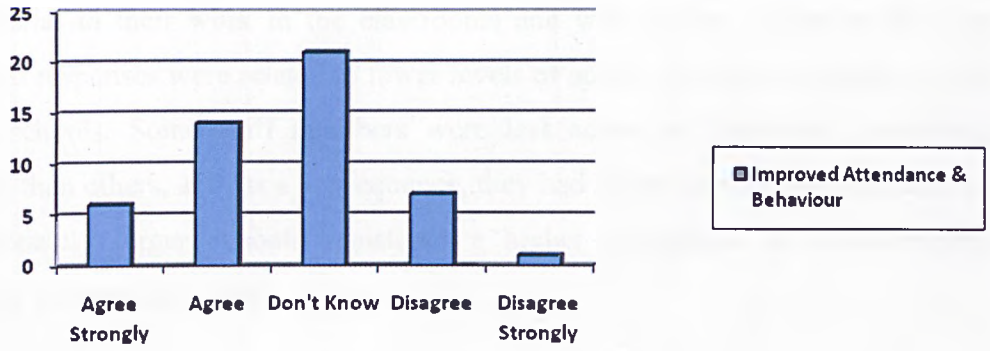


Figure 4.3: Improved attendance and behaviour

Statement 21 elicited teachers' opinions about whether or not the FSCEP activities had had an impact on pupil-teacher relationships. The quality of relationships, pupil-pupil relationships and pupil-teacher relationships had been highlighted in the teacher journals as a key element of successful partnership activities. 64% of respondents felt that better pupil-teacher relationships had resulted from the FSCEP programmes. 28% of teachers registered a 'Don't Know' response to this statement and the remaining

9% did not agree that better pupil-teacher relationships had resulted from the FSCEP activities. The 9% disagreement figure resembles the negative response rate to statement 18, which sought opinions about improved interactions between teachers and parents and families.

Figure 4.4: Better pupil-teacher relations

In summary, the overall response to the nine statements above indicated strong links between the FSCEP activities and the personal growth of participants. On balance, the majority of teachers attributed growth points to the FSCEP activities, which were seen as beneficial to their work in the classrooms and with parents. Some of the non-committal responses were related to lower levels of active teacher participation in the various schools. Some staff members were less active in promoting partnership activities than others, and, as a consequence, they had fewer interactions with parents. Proportionately larger schools registered a higher percentage of non-committal responses than smaller schools.

Educational partnership and capacity building

An overview of teachers' feelings and observations on the capacity-building potential of the FSCEP partnership programmes was elicited through the following statements in the questionnaire:

(4)>>The FSCEP project has impacted on our school planning and policymaking.

(5)>>The action-research element in the project was of benefit to me.

(7)>>FSCEP activities brought a new dynamic to our teaching and learning for my class.

(9)>>FSCEP raised awareness of *complementary learning* and consequently I offer more interactive homework.

(10)>>The FSCEP project provided some well-designed, inclusive, and comprehensive approaches to family involvement in children's learning.

(12)>>The project increased parent involvement in school activities.

(13)>>Home involvement in children's learning increased because of FSCEP.

(14)>>The FSCEP activities enhanced parent/teacher relationships with parents.

(18)>>FSCEP increased my interactions with parents and families.

(19)>>FSCEP improved children's engagement with literacy and numeracy.

(20)>>Children's attendance and behaviour improved because of FSCEP activities.

(21)>>Better pupil/teacher relationships have resulted from FSCEP activities.

(23)>>FSCEP activities resulted in improved networking with other agencies.

(24)>>FSCEP helped our school become a learning centre for adults as well as children.

The school-level impact of the FSCEP activities and their influence on teacher capacity development was elicited by statements 4, 5, 7, 10. Statement 4 focused on impacts on organisational matters in the schools, to which 64% of respondents agreed that FSCEP had had an impact on school planning and policymaking. About a fifth of respondents (22%) indicated that they were unaware of whether or not this was the case, and a small proportion (14%) disagreed with the statement. Statement 5 related to journal-keeping by participating teachers as a means of developing reflective practices. Responses to this statement were also applicable to the issue of capacity building. 58% of respondents indicated that the action research element of the project was beneficial, and this response is substantiated by the content of the completed journals, in which teacher reflexivity in relation to parental involvement was highlighted as an important outcome of the partnership activities. Of the remaining 42% of respondents, 29% choose the 'Don't Know' option to this statement and 13% registered a negative response.

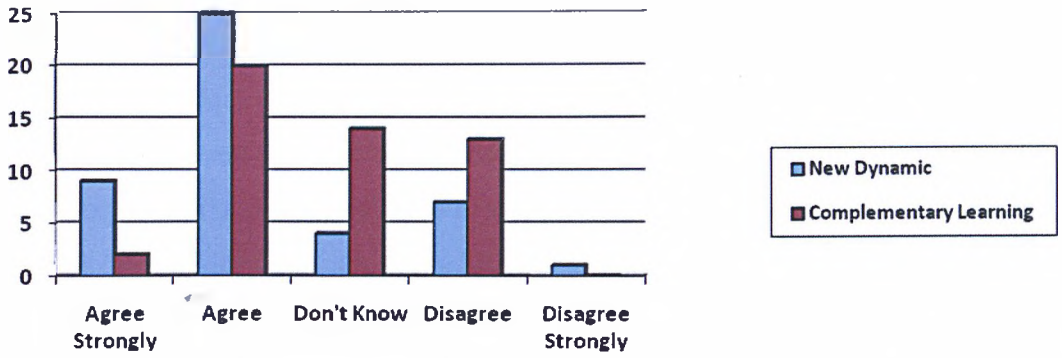


Figure 4.5: New dynamics/complementary learning

Almost three-quarters of respondents agreed that 'FSCEP activities brought a new dynamic to teaching and learning for my class', while less than a fifth (16%) of teachers disagreed with this statement. On a related matter, statement 9 attempted to gauge teachers' awareness of the importance of *complementary learning* in the home and in the community as an aid to the more formal school learning; 45% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that *complementary learning* was important and 'consequently offered more interactive homework'. As an endorsement of this belief, the vast majority of respondents (88%) agreed that the activities had given them a deeper appreciation of what educational partnership was about, with four-fifths (82%) believing that they now had a greater awareness of the value of parental involvement in children's education. All teachers either agreed (54%) or strongly agreed (46%) that they would welcome increased parental involvement in the life of the school, and all but one indicated a desire for increased parent participation in children's education.

Statements 7 and 10 sought teachers' views on the impact of the FSCEP project on education outcomes for children; in relation to these statements, 74% agreed that the activities had brought a new dynamic to teaching and learning in their schools. Also related to children's learning were statements 13, 19, 20 and 21, which elicited teachers' views on the impact of FSCEP programmes on children, from a number of capacity-building perspectives: their engagement with literacy and numeracy activities, their attendance and behaviour, the levels of home involvement in their learning and their relationships with their teachers. Over half the teachers (52%)

agreed that FSCEP improved pupils' engagement with literacy and numeracy, while a third (33%) didn't know and 15% disagreed that this was the case. This may reflect the fact that the main focus of the project in some schools was not on literacy and numeracy, but on other activities in the area of arts education. Partnership activities in the area of art education were very popular in all schools, and were viewed as a means of developing individual capacity in children through intrinsically motivated activities. With regard to attendance and behaviour, 41% of respondents believed that children's attendance and behaviour had improved because of FSCEP activities. In one urban school this figure was as high as 71%, while in a rural school 100% indicated that this was not an issue for them. Overall, a larger proportion of respondents (43%) provided a non-committal response to this statement and a further 16% disagreed with it, which may be an indication of teacher awareness of the many factors involved in pupils' attendance and engagement with school.

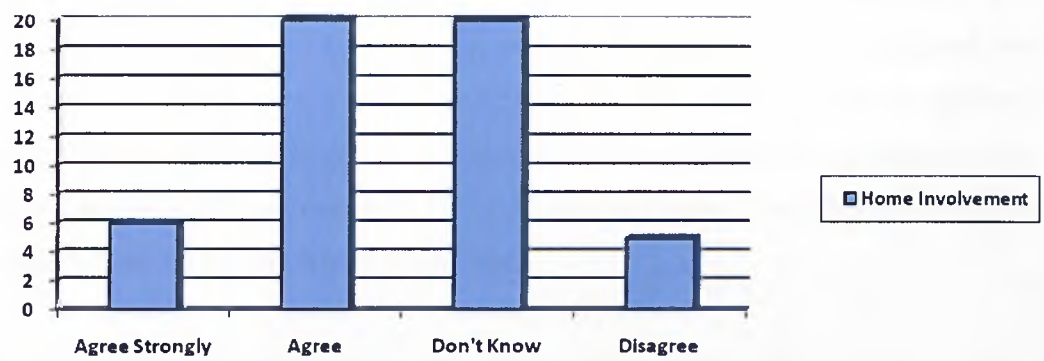


Figure 4.6: Home involvement

Statement 13 related to parental involvement in their children's learning in the home setting. This required some speculation on the part of teachers as to whether or not 'home involvement in children's learning increased because of FSCEP'. Over half the respondents (51%) agreed that home involvement in children's learning increased because of FSCEP activities. A large proportion of respondents (39%) did not know if this was the case, and a tenth (10%) disagreed that this was so. In contrast, 94% of respondents agreed that the FSCEP project had increased parental involvement in partnership activities in the school, and 84% believed that this had improved parent-teacher relationships. This draws attention to the fact that most of the partnership activities were school-based and in the main were organised by teachers

Statements 22, 23 and 24 elicited teachers' views on the impact of the FSCEP project on the local communities and on the capacity-building potential involved. This final section of the survey attempted to gauge the impact of the FSCEP project on the perception of each school within its community. A large majority of respondents (69%) agreed that FSCEP activities raised the school's profile within their communities in positive terms. Again, this statement required a level of speculation on the part of teachers and 27% of respondents registered a non-committal response, while a small percentage (4%) believed that the FSCEP project had not raised their 'school's profile in the community'. Statement 23 sought an indication of the levels of improved networking with other agencies in the community. In relation to this, a majority (55%) agreed that FSCEP had developed their networking capacity, while 39% registered a non-committal response to this statement and a further 6% disagreed that this was the case. Statement 24 elicited teachers' views on their school's role as a learning centre for the community. A large majority of respondents (59%) agreed that FSCEP helped their school to become a learning centre for adults as well as children. In one of the schools, the response to this statement registered full agreement, with 100% of teachers believing that the FSCEP project had helped the school to 'become a learning centre for adults as well as children'.

In summary, the 14 statements that were analysed under Theme B endorsed assertions in the literature that 'the school can be a powerful force for building parent capacity' (Cochrane and Henderson, 1986: cited in Henderson and Berla, 1994:46). In addition, the responses indicate that involvement in the FSCEP partnership programmes was also a source of capacity building for teachers and for children. The partnership activities were seen to have an impact on school planning and policymaking and on teacher reflexivity. Parent capacity development was seen to take place through increased participation in their children's learning, both in the home and in the school. This was seen to impact favourably on children's attendance, behaviour and engagement with learning. The schools' improved standing in their communities was also seen as an outcome of the capacity-building process, and this was related to improved interagency networking and the evolution of the schools as learning centres for their communities.

Educational partnership, its challenges and barriers

An overview of teachers' feelings and observations on the impediments to working in partnership were elicited through the following statements listed below. As explained above, most of the statements were phrased in positive terms, but could, by default, also be interpreted negatively. Negative interpretations provided teacher's views about some of the negative factors in the development and promotion of educational partnership:

(6)>>The FSCEP project has made little or no difference to the way I work as a teacher.

(8)>>The FSCEP project brought an added workload and extra pressure on me as a teacher.

(11)>>The benefits of the project were confined to a small number of teachers in our school.

(15)>>As a teacher, I welcome increased parent involvement in the life of this school.

(16)>>As a teacher, I want increased parent participation in children's learning.

(17)>>Only a limited number of parents benefited from the project.

(22)>>FSCEP activities raised our school's profile in the community.

(24)>>FSCEP helped our school become a learning centre for adults as well as children.

In contrast to most of the statements in the questionnaire, statement 6 was phrased in negative terms. This statement focused on the impact of the FSCEP project on teaching practices in the schools. Over half the respondents (53%) did not agree that 'the FSCEP project has made little or no difference to the way I work as a teacher'. In interpreting this, one could assume that the teaching practices of 47% of respondents were not affected by the partnership activities, with a third (33%) indicating that this was the case and the remaining 14% registering a non-committal response. Somewhat at odds with this is the 88% of respondents who agreed that the activities had given them a deeper appreciation of educational partnership, a figure which is consolidated by a percentage of 82% of teachers who believed they now had a greater awareness of the value of parental involvement in children's education. In addition, the overall contribution of the FSCEP project to the schools was given a strong endorsement, with almost all (98%) respondents indicating that they welcome FSCEP's intervention activities in their schools. Furthermore, all teachers either agreed (54%) or strongly

agreed (46%) that they would welcome increased parental involvement in the life of the school, and all but one indicated a desire for increased parent participation in children's learning. Such a positive response offers both hope and reassurance for the promotion of educational partnership. The discrepancy in the figures with regard to the impact on teaching practices in the schools points to both the complexities involved in finding shared meanings and to the communication challenges within the partnership process.

Statement 8 focused on the challenges involved in developing and working in partnership with parents and community members. This statement elicited teachers' views on the requirements of designing, co-ordinating and implementing educational activity programmes. In response to this, 59% did not agree that FSCEP activities presented an extra workload, while the remaining 41% felt it did bring an additional workload. There were many mitigating factors influencing teachers' responses to this statement: the levels of support available in the endeavour, their own capacities to work collaboratively, their own ability to integrate core curriculum content into the partnership activities, physical and structural conditions within the schools, and so on.

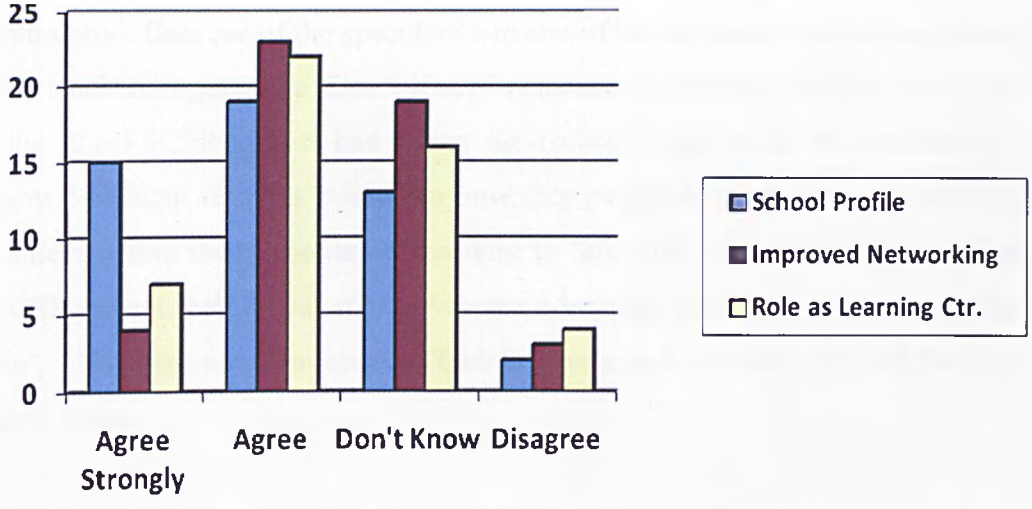


Figure 4.7: School profile/networking/learning centre

Statements 11 and 17 sought an understanding of how widespread the benefits of the partnership programmes were believed to be throughout the schools, both in terms of parental involvement and in terms of whole-school participation. Considering that the

five schools had volunteered to be part of the FSCEP project, it is not surprising that 85% of the overall teaching staff did not agree that its 'benefits were confined to a small number of teachers'. Nevertheless, 4% of respondents felt that FSCEP benefits were 'confined to a small number of teachers', while the remaining 12% gave a non-committal reply. These figures are slightly at variance with the FSCEP policy of adopting a whole-school approach to the development of educational partnership. Statement 17 elicited parents' views about the extent and benefit of the FSCEP activity programmes to parents. 76% of teachers believed that only a limited number of parents had benefited from the FSCEP project, while a further 8% opted for a 'Don't Know' response. However, the remaining 16% of respondents felt that the FSCEP project had benefited a broad range of parents and community members.

One could argue that the statistical response to statements 22 and 24 is somewhat at variance with the statistics in the previous paragraph. These statements elicited teachers' perceptions of the impact of the FSCEP activities on the school's image in the local community. Statement 22 required teachers in each of the schools to speculate about the perception of their school in the local community, to which statement 69% responded that the FSCEP project had 'raised our school's profile in the community'. Because of the speculative nature of the statement it is not surprising that 26% teachers registered a 'Don't Know' response. However, a further 4% did not agree that the FSCEP project had raised the 'school's profile in the community'. Statement 24 sought teachers' views on how they perceived changes to the learning environment within their schools. In response to this, 59% of teachers believed that the FSCEP project 'helped our school become a learning centre for adults as well as children', 33% were non-committal in their response and a further 8% felt that this was not the case.

In summary, the eight statements that were analysed under Theme C interpreted the statistical responses from a negative standpoint. The responses produced some confusing statistics in relation to teachers' perceptions of the impact of the FSCEP project on their professional practice and in relation to the extent to which the partnership programmes reached all members of the school communities. For instance, a large percentage of teachers felt that the FSCEP activities had not had an impact on their teaching practices, while responses to statement 24 indicated that 59%

of respondents believed that their school had 'become a learning centre for adults as well as children. The statistical analysis of other responses was also at variance with this particular finding.

Additional Comments

At the end of the questionnaire, teachers were invited to include additional comments on the subject of the survey. As all responses were anonymous, it was not possible to apply a reference coding system to these quotations. Thirteen of the fifty-one respondents added comments, most of which were very positive about the FSCEP project, such as the comment: "A very worthwhile programme; more of the same please". Another comment highlighted the successes of the project and attributed these successes to "parent enthusiasm and teacher enthusiasm". Another teacher's comment referred to "the confidence-building" nature of the programmes and believed that capacity building within the school had benefited from the project. One teacher pointed to the difficulty of trying to meet the needs of each individual child and parent, but believed that "we must try to do so". The sharing of skills and talents was highlighted by one teacher as an important element of the project. One teacher, who indicated that she was not in a mainstream class, felt that some teachers may have 'felt excluded from the programmes'. Some comments were slightly negative in tone and focused on the difficulties experienced. One comment read: "I was reluctant to begin projects because money was not available up-front to purchase materials". In relation to this difficulty, the FSCEP management had requested school principals to advance sums of money to teachers for prospective activities, while awaiting re-imbursement from the FSCEP fund. Another teacher felt that the project management should offer "greater guidance and back-up" to participating teachers, while another felt that while all the activities were good for promoting partnership that "some were more successful than others".

Conclusion

It is clear from the overall response to the survey that the staffs of the five participating schools were open to the concept of educational partnership and recognised the importance of parents' role in their children's education, while revealing a deep awareness of the influence of the community on their work as teachers. There was strong agreement that the FSCEP project had a favourable impact

on parent-teacher relationships, on pupil-teacher relationships and on school-community relationships, and this was seen as beneficial to the children's growth and development. The survey gives a strong endorsement of the work of the FSCEP project and of the benefits of involving the greater community in the life of a school. It makes a strong argument for the development of educational partnerships as a means of developing individual and community capacity. On balance, the majority of teachers indicated growth points attributed to the partnership activities in relation to their school's culture and practices, and these were seen as beneficial, both to their work in the classrooms and to their work with parents. The schools' standing in their communities was seen as an outcome of the capacity-building process at community level, and this was related to improved interagency networking and the evolution of the schools as learning centres for their respective communities.

It is worth noting, at this point, the limitations of the quantitative findings. Although they provide a statistical overview of the teachers' attitudes towards, and opinions on, the benefits, challenges and structures of working in partnership, they add little to our understanding of how a successful partnership might function and what the impediments to developing such partnerships in all schools might be. What the quantitative findings do is provide a platform for the interpretation of the qualitative findings of this study in relation to the home-school-community dynamic that existed in the five schools in which the FSCEP project operated. Thus, the qualitative data analysed and presented in the subsequent chapters offer a deeper appreciation of the nature, process and outcomes of family-school-community partnership. The next chapter analyses and interprets the qualitative data in relation to educational partnership and personal growth.

Chapter 5

Educational Partnership and Personal Growth

"The partnership activities enriched the fabric of our lives within the school community". (School Principal, ET1)

Introduction

Analysis of the qualitative data is presented and discussed in this chapter in relation to the first identified theme: educational partnership and personal growth. Initially this theme emerged in the research journals and it became more prominent through the use of other methodologies, i.e., discussions and interviews. Continuous analysis of the data revealed the emergence of three sub-themes. These sub-themes relate to the importance of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills in the development of 'social capital', as it was defined in the literature section. The first sub-theme included participant reflexivity on areas such as reflective practice in schools, awareness-raising in the community, embracing difference, and ethical considerations. A second sub-theme included such areas as communication skills and information sharing. A third sub-theme included collaboration skills viewed from three different perspectives: parent-teacher collaboration, internal school collaboration and school-community collaboration.

Even though there is considerable interconnection and interdependence between these sub-themes, they will be teased out in separate sections. The presentation of findings follows the above sequence and draws on the multiple data sources exploited throughout this study. Yin (2003) stresses the importance of multiple data sources as a form of triangulation that enhance the validity and reliability of a study. Large amounts of verbatim data from the journals and interview transcripts are used in the reporting of the findings, as it was considered that the inclusion of such material would enrich the description of the participants' experience and would increase the study's authenticity.

(I) Participant reflexivity

The importance of reflexivity as an effective strategy for working in partnership emerged from the research journals, as well as from the formal interviews and day-to-day discussions with participating teachers, parents and community members. Hertz (1997: viii) explains that 'to be reflexive is to have ongoing conversations about experience while simultaneously living in the moment'. It was evident from an early stage in the research process that teachers were acutely aware of their need to develop greater sensitivity towards parents' experiences and needs. This acknowledgement gave rise to an ethos of working towards more culturally responsive programmes and engaging in greater consultation with parents in the planning and designing of partnership activities. Many teachers felt that greater familiarisation with the children's background, culture and customs was of paramount importance in enhancing and their involvement in the partnership process. The research journals provided a mechanism for the participating teachers to examine their own personal assumptions and beliefs about working in this way.

From the outset, school staffs were aware of the goals of this study: the search for insights into the benefits and outcomes of working in partnership and for a better understanding of the challenges and obstacles to implementing such partnerships. The working definition of partnership adopted by the FSCEP project is 'a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability' (Pugh and De'Ath. 1989: 68). Implementing such a partnership process would inevitably give rise to a great deal of reflection and soul-searching on the part of all involved. To this end, an open, discursive approach was promoted in achieving consensus and in designing and developing activity programmes in all schools. Working together in this way provided many opportunities to be reflexive and to share insights and accumulate knowledge.

Reflective practices in the schools

During the course of the FSCEP project, the staff meetings that I attended in all schools became sites for discussion about partnership issues and in so doing we extended our understanding of what the concept of partnership meant and how best it might be implemented. As one teacher (AT7) pointed out: "We are gaining a deeper

understanding of partnership, which in turn will lead to more consultation with parents and a greater awareness of working closely with the community". Awareness of parents' feelings was seen by another principal (ET1) as crucially important "in establishing a rapport, in building trust, in bridging differences, in gathering information and in developing friendships". In this regard, O'Donohue (1998: 109) points out that 'awareness is one of the greatest gifts you can bring to your friendship. Where there is a depth of awareness there is a great reverence for human presence'. One parent's (DT5) classroom experience seemed to capture this concept concisely:

> To be there inside in the middle of it was a lovely experience...I felt valued and I really appreciated been given the chance to be there... you see your child in a different light...I was thrilled to be there for him.

As the FSCEP project progressed, it became increasingly noticeable in all five staffrooms that, whenever I visited, the conversation would invariably turn to matters of partnership. At one lunch-break, a principal (AT1) commented that "the *them* and *us* mindset is slowly changing". Similarly, a teacher's journal (AT2) recorded: "We noticed that our expressions were changing from *them* and *us* to *we*". This sentiment was echoed in all staffrooms at different times and with increasing regularity. During discussions with participating parents and teachers, comments about the partnership programmes were generally very favourable. In an urban school, one teacher (CT17) claimed that "partnership brings its own reward", and another teacher (CT20) stated that "it (partnership) has far-reaching spin-off effects into other aspects of school life". In this school, parents and the community were now seen, as the principal (CT1) put it, as "an untapped resource for the school". On a cautionary note, one teacher (AT4) believed that "there is a lot of fear amongst teachers about working in partnership with parents", but pointed out that "the more opportunities that are provided, the more partnership grows". Another journal (AT2) endorsed this point of view, but advised that "partnership takes time, understanding, commitment and co-operation".

The term 'reflective practice' has long been a familiar phrase to all teachers, but the practice of documenting teachers' reflections is rare. As explained in the methodology chapter above, a research journal was designed to facilitate the recording of teachers' reflections during the partnership activity programmes. Although these added to

teachers' workloads, they were seen by one school principal (AT1) as "excellent tools for teachers to reflect on their practices and to examine parent/teacher/pupil relationships". Some teachers believed that keeping a reflective journal heightened their sensitivity, not only in relation to parents, but also in relation to their students. One journal (ET1) report on a garden activity read:

> Today's activity provided a good opportunity to observe how the children interact with each other in a less formal setting; it offered an insight into the dynamics between the children, of which I was hitherto unaware.

Another teacher (CT4) wrote about a song and dance activity, in which children and parents were required, with the aid of a skilled facilitator, to learn a wide range of songs within a short space of time for a Christmas concert production:

> This activity led me to re-examine my teaching style...I now allow the children more freedom to express themselves in these classes as opposed to the more structured format I previously favoured...'twas far more enjoyable.

Personal growth for children was prioritised by one teacher in a rural school who designed a six-week creative dance programme involving parents and children. This teacher (DT15) pointed out that "dance has been used as a medium of expression throughout human history across all cultures". She noted that children were learning skills which they would otherwise not develop. Her journal (DT15) read:

> Perhaps through lots of interactive, child-centred tasks the next generation might be more confident and competent...through creative dance the children had the opportunity to develop movements, to express ideas and feelings in progressive stages and to develop communication and listening skills.

The process of designing activity programmes further enabled reflection, as it required schools to complete a funding proposal. The proposal form asked applicants to identify the aims, objectives and rationale for each programme they hoped to run. As coordinator of the FSCEP project, I assisted the schools in this work and encouraged teachers to integrate these activities into whatever strand of the curriculum was currently being studied in their classrooms. This requirement promoted a great deal of personal and professional reflection on the part of teachers, which resulted in the development of many innovative programmes. One illustration

of this was an art activity programme whose main objective was the building of self-confidence. At the end of six weeks, the teacher (CT7) arranged for the children's art work to be displayed in two local shops, and this, she believed, "consolidated their sense of self-worth, accomplishment and pride in their community". Another similar example involves an entry recorded in a teacher's journal (AT2) referring to "a quiet child who lacks confidence". The entry went on to describe how the child's face "lit up when her mother arrived into the classroom for a shared-reading lesson". The teacher (AT2) explained that "it took a lot of persuasion, cajoling and encouragement to bring Mammy into the school", and felt that "it was quite an ordeal for the parent who also seems to lack confidence". Later, while discussing the progress made by both parent and child, this teacher pointed to the opportunities the FSCEP project had provided for her as a teacher, and described how delighted she was with the affirmation she had received from many parents. In her journal (AT2) she stated: "It's a great morale boost for teachers when parents acknowledge the work that's being done in schools".

To a large extent, the planning of the various activity programmes enabled teachers to reflect on the partnership process in relation to their work as professionals. As one journal (ET1) entry put it:

> Exploring the partnership between the children, the parents, and myself has made me realise the asset such a relationship could be ... the parents had a very different point of view to me as a teacher in many areas and this caused me to rethink my stance on a number of issues.

In other journal entries, teachers emphasised the importance of involving the whole family unit in the educational process. One teacher (BT7) stated: "It made me realise that the extended family is a very important unit and needs to be incorporated into our plans". Another journal report (DT3) consolidates this point: "We need to be aware of the importance of the whole extended family when designing activity programmes". This provides evidence that, during the course of the project, teachers began to see the role of the school in a new light. For instance, one teacher (CT7) aimed to encourage recycling in the community through an art project and her journal stated that, as a consequence, "a new attitude has developed in the children and parents around the issue of recycling".

It should be noted, however, that not all parents were able or willing to become involved in school-based partnership activities. While high visibility of parents within the schools was a desired outcome, because "it gives off the right signals to students about the importance of education" (AT1), it was difficult to maintain the momentum of involvement after a few sessions had elapsed. During the course of activity programmes, only once-off fieldtrips or audience participation occasions brought out a full cohort of parents. In relation to this, it was pointed out by a young member of staff (CT8) in one school that "there simply wouldn't be space for large groups of adults to work in my classroom". One of the biggest challenges for all schools, therefore, was to find ways of reaching all parents and creating meaningful opportunities for them to be involved in their children's learning. Much discussion took place in an attempt to clarify all participants' thinking on these issues during the many interactions involved in designing, planning and implementing programmes. A general consensus amongst all school staffs believed that any activities which enabled parents to become involved in their children's education and development, whether in the classroom, the home, or in the community, could be viewed as partnership in practice. This was an important learning point for many teachers, which "improved the quality of the partnership programmes by reducing the pressure to have adults present in the classrooms" (CT1).

Awareness-raising in the communities

Parent reflexivity also emerged as a theme during the data analysis. This was captured in a less structured way, mainly during the course of conversations and discussions around planning meetings, but also through the interviews. A father (CT2) of two young children stated: "What you put in, you get out. You need to put an effort in to help children achieve...children pick up on parents' expectations". During the course of the interview, this parent explained that he worked at home and welcomed the chance to be more involved in his children's education. He claimed that "a man can't hang around in the school, you need an invitation, a reason to be part of your child's learning", and he was grateful for the opportunities afforded him through the FSCEP project. It gave him "a ticket of admission to my daughter's classroom". In another school, a father (BP3) came from his workplace to be in his daughter's classroom for the Science Discovery activities and later joked about it by saying: "The things we do

for our children, but if we don't do it, who will?" In the light of this, constructing a more central role for male members of families and designing programmes to this effect became an issue of concern in the schools.

At various points, core groups of parents and community members formed sub-committees to help plan and implement certain activities. These sub-committee meetings were often the source of much reflexivity and awareness-raising for those present, but they also had spin-off effects on other members of the community. In one such sub-committee, the issue of male participation became a topic of concern. Consequently, the issue of finding ways of engaging with more male members of families was addressed by one such sub-committee. It was noted that some programmes, particularly in the area of sport and outdoor activities, provided greater opportunities for male members of families to become involved. This school community was particularly adventurous in involving fathers, not only in the area of football coaching, but also in the re-development of the school football pitch. Older children were delighted to help out with this development, particularly during class time, and, as a result, a new enthusiasm for Gaelic football was noticeable in the school.

Across all the schools, male participation within the classroom was low in comparison with female participation. In response to this challenge, a facilitator of one community-focused activity programme pioneered a new approach, suggesting that: "We would like to explore the possibility of visiting their [the fathers'] place of work". Subsequently, the children were invited to visit various work environments throughout this rural community, which were mainly the workplaces of fathers. This worked out well, and teachers and parents alike appreciated the learning involved in these visits. The activities were viewed by the teacher (ET1) as a means of expanding participants' worldviews in ways that fostered deeper insights into the holistic nature of learning and knowledge generation. Similar experiences in other schools raised awareness for teachers and parents of their complementary roles in the children's education. A mother (CP4) of three school-going children commented that "it's great for parents and teachers to be working together...in this way we learn things about our own children as well and you see what their potential is in the different areas ". Another parent (BP7) pointed out that "parents need to be part of the process and can

learn a lot from being in the classroom and might be able to continue the lessons in the home".

In many instances, the data highlighted the importance of parental presence, both male and female, in the classrooms. Being present in the classroom setting, even for brief periods, stimulated some reflexivity for one parent (DP6), who pointed to the benefit of observing activities in the classroom: "You get to see a different side of your child, you see how they relate to other children in the classroom context and you're happy to know that they're doing alright and becoming their own person". The benefit of spending time in the classroom was also highlighted by another young mother (AP7) of four children, who reflected on the importance of the ability to give special attention to each child:

> I think she loves me coming into her classroom...it's like our time together, because at home she has to fight for my attention. So I think that when I come down to the school...that's our time together doing our special thing just for an hour or so...it was kinda 'me and her time' and that will have a positive effect on her.

This observation captured what many other parents had articulated at different times throughout the project as important for them in their children's development.

The question of what parents wanted most for their children from the school system often arose during the course of this research. Invariably the answer would be, as one mother (BP2) put it, "that they are happy and fulfilled in themselves and develop their personalities and their confidence". Tolle's insight (2004:88) is relevant here, and became the central theme of many discussions: 'Your life's journey has an outer purpose and an inner purpose'. For Tolle, if too much attention is focused on our outward purpose, we are likely to 'completely miss the journey's inner purpose, which has nothing to do with *where* you are going or *what* you are doing but everything to do with *how*' (Tolle, 2004: 88). The word *how*, therefore, became an important word in discussions relating to the working of the FSCEP project, particularly in relation to working with the more vulnerable sections of society. How we related to each other as fellow humans was seen as an important outcome by many participants of the partnership activities. During one such discussion, an urban teacher (BT14) stated that "our education system tends to focus on the outer purpose often to the exclusion of the inner purpose". She claimed that "the system places a

high value on academic achievement, sometimes to the neglect of other important qualities and attributes".

Embracing difference

All the participating schools in the project cater for children from diverse backgrounds within the school communities. These include children from the Traveller Community, children from different ethnic backgrounds, and children with special needs. The schools were deeply conscious of facilitating the involvement of diverse groups in the activity programmes. This was exemplified by the attempts made by one school to integrate the children attending the autistic unit into mainstream activities. This proved very successful, as evidenced by one specific activity programme which was tailored to suit the needs of children attending this unit. Having other members of the family present in the autistic unit provided key learning for teachers as well as family members. As the teacher in charge of this unit (ET19) remarked: "When his mother and sister were present he was very calm compared to other times and seemed to enjoy all the attention he was getting". This eight-week programme provided opportunities for some members of staff, i.e., resource teachers and support teachers, to receive training and to develop new ideas and, as one teacher (ET3) pointed out, "these skills were transferrable to my own classroom". This activity programme helped to bring about a realisation that catering for children with special needs within an educational partnership brought added value to the learning experience for all participants within that particular programme. It also raised awareness of the fact that parents may also have special requirements which should be considered when designing activities.

Four of the five schools have a small number of children from different ethnic backgrounds, all of whom were encouraged to participate in the partnership activities. All four principals reported a readiness on the part of the families of these children to take part in activities wherever possible. When one school sought help in preparing the school hall for a summer show, the principal (BT1) pointed out that "a group of foreign national parents volunteered to make up a large backdrop for the stage and also painted colourful posters for display on the walls". At a later stage, many of these parents participated in the focus group discussions that were held in the same school, and readily shared their views of their own cultural experiences. This was

something new for the school community and, as such, was enjoyed as a new experience. In another school, an activity programme celebrated cultural diversity by holding an intercultural fair where parents and children of many different ancestries set up cultural displays in the school hall for the local community to view.

Another area that demanded some attention during planning meetings was finding ways of encouraging the involvement of Traveller families in the partnership activities. Two of the urban schools had a number of children in attendance from Traveller families from local halting sites. In one of these schools, members of one Traveller family gave their whole-hearted support to a partnership programme that involved a member of their family in a 'Write-a-book' activity. The class-teacher's (AT2) journal explained:

> On one occasion when a seven-year old child won a prize in the Write-a-Book activity, his parents were full of praise for the school and as a reward for the child decided to take the whole family for lunch in a local restaurant to celebrate his success.

One other family profile presented serious challenges to the development of partnership, and gave rise to much discussion at various levels in the urban schools. There was a marked awareness amongst school staffs of community members who were engaged in criminal activities and in anti-social behaviour. In implementing the activity programmes, school principals seemed to be in agreement that the most appropriate policy was to adopt a non-judgemental approach, while at the same time remaining alert to the dynamic which operated between other parents within that community. In this regard, the accumulated knowledge of experienced staff members in these schools proved to be an invaluable asset to the FSCEP project. Discussions on this topic in one school raised further concerns in reference to ethical considerations for working in partnership.

Ethical considerations

One principal (CT1) cautioned against putting undue pressure on parents to attend classroom activities and against exerting this pressure on them through their children. One parent (AP5) expanded on this point during the course of a group interview:

> In today's world there's a lot of mothers working. It was said to me on numerous occasions that they feel guilty that they can't come...they feel they are letting their children down...and they, themselves, feel kinda left out of things.

She pointed out that "children for whom no adult can attend are likely to feel bad about it". Another parent (CP3) who had attended a number of classroom activities corroborated this point by stating that "sometimes when some of the things are going on in the classroom and some of the kids don't have parents with them; you see their little faces and you feel sorry for them". This issue was raised at the focus group meeting between parents, teachers and community members, and the ensuing discussion provided useful insights about the ethical considerations to be taken into account when implementing partnership activities. One parent (CP2) stated that "parents who may not have gone far in school themselves may feel intimidated and are made to feel bad about themselves", while another pointed out that "parents who are working or minding small children find it difficult to attend".

In response to this, a HSCL co-ordinator (AT7) explained that, during many of the activities in her school, other family members, such as grandparents or older siblings, came to participate and that the children seemed quite happy with this arrangement. In addition, she explained that the grown-ups who came into her classroom "had a very inclusive attitude towards all of the children and made sure no one felt left out". Endeavouring to develop a partnership pedagogy which was sensitive to the needs and circumstances of all parents was highlighted as a very important consideration. As a consequence, the importance of effective communication skills was singled out at this meeting as a key element in the development of partnership approaches in the educational process.

(II) Communication skills

The data contained many references to the importance of communication skills, indicating that communication is far more than the mere sharing of information. Communication skills were seen as a key element in relationship-building and also in developing bonds of friendship. It was accepted by all school staffs that the development of good communication skills was crucial to the development of educational partnership. During the focus-group session, the issue of good

communication was discussed in the context of children's behaviour. The issue of discipline requirements in the formal learning environment of the school setting was discussed and contrasted with the informal setting of the home environment. During the course of the discussion, it emerged that misunderstandings between parents and teachers are often related to the behaviour of children while in the care of teachers. It was accepted that agreement between the home and the school with regard to codes of behaviour was of paramount importance for the smooth running of partnership activities.

The data also indicated that communication takes place at many levels and in many forms, and it highlighted the importance of the parents' 'first impressions' of the school. When interviewed, one parent (DP3) stated:

> I felt so embarrassed coming in for the first time, but the teacher was brilliant, she explained everything so well and told me not to worry and made me feel at ease. I think you kinda forget about it when you see the kids enjoying themselves and you start to enjoy it too because they're enjoying it...you look forward, then, to coming in every week and doing different stuff with them.

In another interview, a parent (BP7) of a child in one of the urban schools drew attention to the improvement in her communication skills as a result of participating in classroom activities:

> The things I was doing with the kids in the classroom in a way kinda relates to them and their little world and so when you get home if they are talking about it you can communicate better with them because you know what they've been doing in the classroom and so there's more fun in doing it with them at home.

In another urban school, a parent (AP2) spoke of "being there" for her child and was delighted with her daughter's growing confidence. She attributed this to her own presence in the classroom and seemed to appreciate the many subtle ways in which communication takes place:

> I knew she was shy, but every week she is coming on and she is getting better and better. When she sees me in around the school it makes her feel special; it gives her more confidence and makes her feel more involved. When she has to stand up and say out her name she looks at me and smiles and every week she has been that little bit louder...her teacher said she is getting more and more confident.

While accepting the importance of interpersonal communication, teachers were also very aware of the need to communicate the concept of partnership to the larger audience of parents and local community members. To this end, many different methods of information sharing were used during the course of the FSCEP project.

Information sharing

The practical aspects of communicating with large numbers of people were highlighted in the reflective journals. Effective sharing of information was seen as an important element of communication, but was also viewed as a difficult undertaking. In the early stages of the project, one principal (AT1) stated that "it was difficult to communicate the concept of partnership to some staff members and that parents had little or no understanding of what working in partnership meant". In order to address this problem, the principal suggested that a 'flyer' should be designed to convey in simple format what the project was trying to accomplish. This principal asserted that "the more informed parents are, the more willing they will be to buy into what we are trying to do". After much re-drafting, the flyer was circulated to all members of the school community and was also hand-delivered to other agencies working in the school catchment area. This provided an opportunity to improve local networking and a chance to discuss common aims and objectives with other local agencies working with children; prominent among which were the Family Resource Centre (FRC), the Local Education Committee (LEC) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). This exercise was then replicated in the other four school environments. In addition, FSCEP articles in the school newsletters or magazines provided effective mechanisms for disseminating information to the wider community, particularly in relation to the benefits for the whole community of working in partnership.

(III) Collaboration skills

Many of the participants' journal entries highlighted the role of FSCEP as a catalyst for increased interaction between all the partners involved. A teacher (CT8) in one school remarked that "it creates interaction between all partners and causes things to happen". One principal (DT1) stated that "having the FSCEP coordinator calling to the school on a regular basis kept us focused on the development of partnership. We knew we had to have our ideas thought out and ready to roll when he came". With

the passage of time, teachers began to see partnership as a huge learning experience which brought many benefits to the school and to the classroom. In an interview one teacher (CT4) highlighted the mutuality of the learning process and expressed her appreciation of the support provided by the FSCEP project. She stated:

> You need something like FSCEP to focus you and make you think of ideas to bring school more into the community and the community into the school, but this can be extremely difficult to do without a focus and without support.

A HSCL co-ordinator (CT14) expressed a similar opinion, and indicated that the moral support and the framework provided by the FSCEP project were just as important as the funding and guidance offered:

> There is a lot of fear among teachers with regard to working in partnership...that's why it is so important to have something like the FSCEP project to get you going...it provides a mechanism through which to develop partnership and helps you become proactive in involving parents.

Many teachers acknowledged in the journals that through FSCEP activities their collaboration skills were improved, but they also pointed to the extra work involved in working collaboratively. As one teacher (BT14) stated, "you need to be super organised when you have parents coming into the classroom and you must have everything very well prepared". As well as its impact on school practice, there was also evidence that the FSCEP project had an impact on school policy. In two of the schools, special duties posts were assigned to members of staff, carrying responsibility for promoting educational partnership. One such staff member explained that this resulted in partnership issues being prioritised on the agenda at staff meetings, and that, consequently, this increased collaboration between all partners in the education process: increased parent-teacher collaboration, internal school collaboration and school-community collaboration.

Parent-teacher collaboration

At various times in all five schools, many parents, particularly mothers, gave willingly of their time and energy in supporting the partnership programmes. Participating in this way was a new experience, not just for parents, but also for

teachers and pupils. Once the initial apprehension had worn off, it proved to be a very positive learning experience for the vast majority of those who became involved. One parent (DP3) pointed out that "you feel differently about the school ... you are friends with the teacher and you know what's going on". Another (EP3) believed that it was important for parents to have first-hand knowledge of classroom activities: "Parents and the community can see what teachers have to do in the school and should try to support them". A parent (CP6) who was an active participant in a community development project hinted at the political dimension of partnership, and concluded that "showing parents and teachers what power they have when the whole school community works together is what it's all about". In the journals of two teachers, one from an urban school and one from a rural school, similar views about the reciprocal nature of learning were expressed, and both highlighted the positive effects of working collaboratively. The journal from the urban school (AT7) read: "It provides a framework through which we can learn from each other...it generates a lot of enthusiasm and people are interested in how everything is progressing". In a similar vein, a parent (BP4) pointed out that "being in the classroom provided an opportunity for informal chats with the teacher that helped her to understand how her child was coming along". It is interesting to note that these informal chats were seen by many parents as far more helpful than the formal once-a-year parent-teacher meetings.

It was clear from the data that endeavouring to work in close collaboration with parents made additional demands on teachers' time and energy. In this respect, some experiences were less positive than others, especially in the early stages of the project. One teacher (DT15) commented that "parents had too little understanding of partnership and that they saw it as a chore rather than something that could and should be enjoyed". Another teacher (ET2) expressed some annoyance that all the organisation and administration involved in putting a partnership programme in place had been left to her, and that it had created a lot of extra work:

> It is definitely a lot of extra work on teachers. Composing letters and sending them out and the whole organisation of things takes up a lot of time and energy ... you can't invite parents in if you are not properly prepared for them.

In spite of the demands and challenges, however, the teacher in question engaged enthusiastically with parents and showed great diligence in carrying out the partnership activities.

Some of the programmes undoubtedly demanded more preparation and planning than others, but these also offered greater scope for parent input and collaboration. Principal amongst these were Christmas concerts, summer shows and whole-school participation in various community celebrations. As the FSCEP project progressed, it was clear, as one teacher (BT17) commented, that "the concept of shared decision-making was gaining appreciation in our school". A principal (AT1) in another school pointed out that "it is necessary to involve parents at the early stages of planning programmes and seek their advice and input, as this leads to greater co-operation when implementing activities". In preparing for their summer show, one of the schools employed a facilitator (CF2) whose interpersonal skills proved very successful in involving large numbers of parents in various partnership roles. She was particularly skilful in delegating tasks and sharing the workload, and pointed out that "with a little persuasion all volunteers were ready and willing to help out". She went on to say that "all the parents who came took on different roles, offered advice and suggestions and pooled their talents".

Internal school collaboration

The FSCEP project necessitated a great amount of teamwork on the part of school staffs. The willingness and ability of staff members to work collaboratively, however, is not something that can be taken for granted; as one principal noted, it "needs to be fostered and maintained" (DT1). Ensuring a whole-school approach was seen by all principals as a necessary element in making partnership work well. Another principal (AT1) believed that, "for partnership to succeed, all staff members, including ancillary staff, should be of one mind in our approach to parental involvement". It became clear from the start that school secretarial and caretaking staff had a key role to play in the partnership process. In many instances, the schools' secretaries or caretakers were the first point of contact for parents and other visitors entering the school. Their relationship with parents was mainly on a first name basis and they were generally seen, as one parent (AP2) put it, as "more approachable". The interpersonal skills of the secretaries and caretakers, as well as their talents for reaching out to

visitors and making them feel welcome and at ease, were commented on at many staff meetings. Ironically, monthly staff meetings in none of the schools included ancillary staff members and, as a consequence, whole-school approaches to partnership were discussed in their absence. Another difficulty arising from attempts to bring all staff members on board arose in a school in which one member (DT2) of staff had previously pioneered innovative ways of working with parents and felt that her work was "being overshadowed and duplicated by some of the activity programmes of the FSCEP project". On reflection, it was accepted that her observations were justified. Making amends and attempting to clear up misunderstandings met with some success, but it seemed that some misgivings remained. This experience highlighted the necessity of such collaboration skills as working in ways that are sensitive to the feelings of others and that acknowledge the contribution of all participants.

School/community collaboration

Probably one of the best examples of overall collaboration took place in one of the schools as part of an activity programme called 'Our Community'; a project which seemed to energise all those who took part. A brief description of how this project evolved and developed will give the reader an appreciation of the potential of such a project for personal growth and fulfilment. This project set out to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the local Community Development Project (CDP). CDPs are government-sponsored agencies which work in deprived areas. The FSCEP project, in conjunction with CDP personnel, arranged a number of planning meetings, with the aim of designing a six week activity programme devoted to a community theme which would highlight and celebrate the community's successes over the past ten years. A plan of action was decided upon, beginning with an exercise which involved gathering data about the locality by the children and their families. Twenty-seven children, accompanied by eight adults and two teachers, set off in different directions on a walking tour of the locality. Each child/family had been given a disposable camera which would allow each of them to take twenty photographs of what they considered were important features of their community. As the children shared their 'world', pointing out where grandparents and other family relations lived, the walk-about generated a great deal of excitement and interest amongst the people encountered by the group. This proved to be a valuable intergenerational learning

experience for all. Much good-humoured banter was exchanged and many favourable comments were received. One grandmother (BP2) commented that "children love school nowadays ... the teachers do great work with them".

All sorts of interesting interpretations of the word 'community' surfaced from the students' analyses of their photographs. For example, one student viewed the Lidl supermarket as the hub of the community, while another family viewed the bus shelter as a community focal point. Other interpretations of what community meant included reference to the school, the church, the main street and the local shops. Over the following weeks, attempts were made to represent these concepts in mural form and as three-dimensional art works. This work was cleverly incorporated into curricular activities in the classrooms and became the central theme of many of the lessons. The children's enthusiasm was palpable and the presence of parents in the classroom was reassuring for them. The nature of the activities ensured that children were engaging in peer-tutoring and co-operative learning as they grappled with constructing the three-dimensional representations of their neighbourhood. The parent input in the classroom proved to be a rich source of hitherto untapped ideas and talents. Their creativity in sourcing and using materials was noted by the principal. In her interview, a nine year-old girl (BC2) spoke of "feeling safe and happy in the classroom", while one of the boys (BC2) stated that "it was cool to see my mom in the classroom". Others used words like, "good fun", "different", "better than schoolwork anyway" to describe their experiences. Admittedly, it was far more demanding on the teachers than the traditional school day, but, when asked about the extra workload involved, one of the teachers responded: "I enjoyed it so much that I didn't see it as extra work". A participating colleague stated that "it brought its own rewards and covered many other aspects of the school curriculum". The teachers who had organised this partnership programme were very skilful in delegating roles to parents and to children, and it was interesting to observe the various forms of power-sharing which had taken place.

At the end of the six weeks the finished collaborative products were put on display in the community hall and a celebration ceremony was organised by the CDP officer. This proved to be a great social occasion, with tea and coffee and lots of tasty snacks, all home-produced by the participating parents. The contribution of this partnership

activity programme to community spirit and goodwill was obvious. One mother (BP2) stated that "it caused a great buzz in the community", while her daughter (BC2) believed that "it keeps the schoolwork interesting to have parents helping out".

Conclusion

This chapter described how the educational partnership process promoted the personal growth of participants and enabled people to work more effectively together. The development of a reflexive mode of working fostered by the planning and implementation of the partnership activities was seen to have had an impact on the performance and sense of wellbeing of all those involved. Participants believed that the partnership programmes provided many opportunities for personal growth and fulfilment, which added to the quality of their lives within the school communities. Communication skills were highlighted as a key factor in working collaboratively, and these skills were seen to have improved as parents and teachers engaged with each other in developing the partnerships. With improved information-sharing, teachers and parents were enabled to explore their attitudes and values together and to develop a greater sense of consensus and a common understanding of their respective roles within an educational partnership process. Collaboration skills were examined from three perspectives: parent-teacher collaboration, internal school collaboration, and, more broadly, school-community collaboration. The benefits and challenges of working collaboratively were scrutinised and discussed in relation to each of these perspectives and this provided many examples of best practice in family-school-community collaboration. The upcoming chapter presents the data analysis and findings on educational partnership and its potential for capacity building.

Chapter 6

Educational Partnership and Capacity Building

"Working with parents through the partnership activities has a positive effect on the life of the school. It provides opportunities to learn from each other and learn together. We've become closer and stronger as a community." (School Principal, BT1).

Introduction

An in-depth analysis of all the data collected indicated that capacity building took place in all five school communities during the course of the FSCEP project. This chapter explores the many ways in which the educational partnership process enhanced individual, as well as community, capacity. The structure of the chapter falls into three sections: (I) understanding capacity building, (II) quality of relationships, and (III) democratic practices. The first section develops an understanding of the experience of capacity building across the five school communities, drawing on the various definitions of capacity building provided in the literature. The development of capacity in the school communities was seen to be largely dependent on two factors: firstly, the quality of the relationships between participants and, secondly, the level of democratic practice that prevailed in the schools. In section (II), the quality of relationships as a key factor in capacity building is examined under a number of sub-headings, namely, mutual respect, welcoming atmosphere, trust, sensitivity; and appreciation. In section (III) of the chapter the importance of democratic practices in the schools is examined under three sub-headings: co-operation, empowerment, and children's voice.

(I) Capacity building

There are numerous definitions of 'capacity building' which describe the process through which an individual's strengths are developed in order to confront individual challenges; a process which in turn enhances a community's potential to exploit opportunities. A definition put forward by Kildare County Development Board

focuses on the educational aspect of capacity building: 'Capacity building is about increasing the confidence of the learner in themselves and their ability, so as to enable them to fully take part in education' (www.kildare.ie/kcdb/kildare-2012-strategy/education.asp 24 - 6 - 2009). Another definition from Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority places greater emphasis on community development as an outcome: 'Capacity building [means] increasing the potential to gain maximum results/benefits for the community' (www.glenelghopkins.vic.gov.au/ 24 – 6 - 2009). For the purposes of the FSCEP project, capacity building was seen as the strengthening of participants' capacity to determine their own values and priorities and their ability to act on these values in their own development.

As both a concept and a strategy, capacity building has relevance for all communities and for society as a whole, but it has particular application to communities which are experiencing disadvantage. Cochran and Henderson (1986) contend that 'the school can be a powerful force for building parent capacity' (cited in Henderson and Berla, 1994:46), and this contention was corroborated by the FSCEP data. Glickman's (1998) assertion that society is largely improved by how citizens live in everyday personal interactions is very relevant in this respect. As pointed out by a Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator (AT7) in one of the urban schools, "when you've been working with parents on a project it creates its own dynamic and you get to know them very well; close friendships develop and a sense of solidarity begins to grow between the school and the community". One parent (AP2) from this school explained that she "found it a good way of building a relationship with neighbouring children ... my little one was telling me about her friends in class and now I know who they are". This parent had recently settled in the area and was happy to participate in the partnership activities, since it provided a means of becoming acquainted with other members of the community. A number of parents in all the schools highlighted the social aspect of the activity programmes as very important to them. During the course of an interview, one parent (BP6) stated: "It's great to be asked to help out in the classroom ... we all have something to offer ... 'tis good to feel needed; I felt a bit nervous at first but felt good afterwards".

A point of O'Donohue's (2003:143) is pertinent here. He decries the loss of what he describes as the 'web of betweenness' within communities, in which traditionally

'there was a sense that the individual life was deeply woven into the lives of others'. He asserts that this web is unravelling fast and needs to be rebuilt. The data gathered during the course of the FSCEP project indicated that the partnership activities made a very positive contribution towards re-building this 'web of betweenness', by promoting the building of capacity in all five schools. For example, in one rural school, parents, grandparents and other family members gave freely of their time and energy to help out with the Christmas concert. This made a wide range of parental skills, ranging from artistic to practical skills, available to the school. The principal's journal entry (ET1) which described the concert preparations, highlighted the school's potential for community capacity building: "It made it all so easy...when we were finished with the rehearsals and the dressing up, a number of mothers stayed behind to tidy up and I found them reading to a group of children in the resource room. This isn't a school anymore...it's a big family."

Such outcomes bring to mind the refrain of a popular 'rock' song proclaiming that 'we carry each other' (U2 – *One*). Drawing attention to 'the need to understand the new basis for social connectedness', Pahl suggests that "informal solidarity, based on friendship, may well become more important by providing the necessary cement to hold the bricks of an increasingly fragmented social structure together" (Pahl, 2000: 11). He sees the term 'social capital' as helpful in advancing our understanding of 'social connectedness' in our modern world (2000:6). It is this informal solidarity which Potapchuk *et al.* (1997: 130) referred to as 'the glue that holds the community together'.

It was in this sense that the FSCEP partnership programmes set out to develop the capacity of the school communities to engage in collective educational activities which would lead to the development of a strong social infrastructure in those communities. A community development worker (CC2) who worked closely with the local school in implementing many of the activity programmes believed that the FSCEP project was "unleashing [a] potential inherent in the community" which would provide opportunities for further development. This belief is endorsed by the work of O'Donohue (2003:143), who suggests that 'true community is an ideal where the full identities of awakened and realised individuals challenge and complement each other. In this sense both individuality and originality enrich self and others'.

Educational outcomes

As the partnership activities became more firmly established within the culture of the schools, their impact on the development of individual capacity began to emerge. This was noted by a principal (DT1) in one of the rural schools, who acknowledged that a lot of the activity programmes had been facilitated by local community members. In this school, a local musician was employed to facilitate a music appreciation programme in the classroom for parents and children. This facilitator believed that there were "a lot of untapped talent and skills in the community that would benefit children's learning". As this activity programme was repeated for different classes, it unearthed a diverse range of musical talents within the community, including proficiency in a variety of different musical instruments. Thus, the programme provided an audit of the skills and talents of community members. This led to an invitation being extended to other local musicians to give weekly workshops on their chosen instruments in the school. This expanded the rich musical culture already in existence in the school, and was greatly appreciated by many staff members. One of the teachers (DT16) involved in the activity wrote in her journal: "meeting with members of the community in this way was a new experience for me. I see it as a great step forward for us as a school to be fostering such links and utilising local talent". The facilitator (DF2) who had helped to organise these workshops wrote the following summary in the reflective journal at the end of the music appreciation programmes:

> I really enjoyed the time I spent working in the school, and together we developed more creative ways of working with families. Parents and other people in the community have so much to offer if we can find the time to listen. Parents can be of so much help in creating a safe, natural and often more exciting school environment for children. Hopefully it will become a natural way of thinking; that parents walk in and out of schools without anybody feeling awkward.

The nature of the partnership programmes gave rise to learning opportunities which were more culturally responsive and gave children and parents a greater 'ownership' of the education agenda. Vygotsky's (1978, cited in Daniels, 1996: 147-149) social constructivism points to an agreed-upon socially-constructed reality, within which culture endows the child with the cognitive tools needed for development. Armed with this knowledge, the FSCEP project attempted to locate learning in contexts that were meaningful and exciting for the families involved. The importance of the non-

formal learning that takes place in the home and in the community came increasingly to be seen as complementary to the learning that takes place in the classroom. The capacity of parents as educators was promoted and expanded through the partnership programmes, as parents, teacher, and students engaged with each other in designing and implementing more diverse and innovative programmes.

As the activities progressed, it became clear, that the FSCEP experiences were beginning to have an impact on teaching and learning styles and, as one principal (ET1) suggested, this seemed to encourage teachers "to push out the boundaries a bit further" when planning and designing activity programmes. Also, the iterative and accumulative effects of repeating programmes, particularly ones like Shared Reading and Maths for Fun, were noted in some teacher journals as effective ways of improving literacy and numeracy levels for students which had spin-off benefits for parents. A HSCL coordinator (CT 14) believed that such partnership activities had "potential to stimulate and advance adult education in the community".

These learning experiences were shared with other schools through the FSCEP co-ordinator and, as a result, a renewed search for local talent to deliver activity programmes was prioritised in all of the schools. One principal's (ET1) journal reported: "It opened our eyes to the talent that exists within the school community of parents and extended family, which we attempted to harness in different ways and which achieved significant success". In one urban school a local dance instructor facilitated a number of creative dance programmes which, in the words of one parent, (BP3) provided "an enjoyable experience for both parents and children". The principal of this school pointed out that the 'hip-hop' dancing classes provided an innovative way of fulfilling the physical education requirement of the school's curriculum. These classes were well attended by many of the mothers who were members of an aerobics group in the community. In another school, parental ICT expertise was employed in an attempt to raise awareness about the school throughout the community. This resulted in a DVD of school activities being circulated to all families of school-going children. Similarly, in two other schools, cookery workshops facilitated the sharing of local culinary skills and expertise and also provided opportunities for capacity building, at a deeper level, as parents and teachers engaged with each other in shared learning experiences.

Shared learning experiences

A facilitator with exceptional skills in the performing arts was employed by the three urban schools to help with concert productions and summer shows. Because her role required moving between schools, it facilitated the sharing of good practice and the exchange of ideas amongst teachers, as indicated in a reflective journal entry (CT2):

> It was very difficult at first trying to convince grown-ups to get stuck in and venture into the 'unknown'. We explored many different projects; from puppetry to singing, line dancing to costume making. The people I worked with were amazing. Grown-ups, teachers and children alike all working together ... we've come so far in such a short space of time and long may it continue.

In many instances, parents were delighted to be asked to share their skills and expertise with the schools. In one activity programme, parents shared their crochet skills with the children and their teacher. On one such occasion, a grandmother (BP2) commented: "I love doing the crochet with the sixth-class girls ... we talk and tell stories while we're doing it ... I think I would have made a good teacher". In the junior section of this school, a young mother (BP5), who shared her skills in the Music for Fun activity in which her four-year-old child was taking part, said: "I like being in the classroom, I like helping out ... 'tis good seeing my own little fellow mixing with the others". This parent actively encouraged other parents to attend the Music for Fun activity, which resulted in very high attendance at each session. On such occasions, the mutuality of the learning experience was clearly evident. One teacher's journal (BT17) reported that "the school learned a lot from the parents ... parents and other family members can learn a lot by being close to their children's education ... it's a two-way street". In a shared-reading activity in the same school, a parent (AP3) said that she "picked up a lot of useful tips on how to help with their homework and will try them out at home". This parent had been very involved in the making of 'story-sacks' for infant classes, using decorated pillowcases that were used for holding a variety of 'prompts' about a particular story. She believed that "the story-sacks were a great idea for getting children interested in reading".

On another occasion, two fourth-class groups combined to produce Mother's Day cards. This was a successful piece of teamwork which required much detailed preparation by the teachers involved. The occasion was one of great enthusiasm for

members of the large gathering that had assembled for this task. A teacher's (BT20) journal for this activity read: "We had six parents, two grannies, one aunt, and three older sisters assisting us in the classroom". This allowed for much interactive group work, which generated huge enthusiasm and created "a great buzz in the classroom". The atmosphere was very pleasant and everybody related to each other in a very positive manner. One of the children from this group (EC2) stated in a group interview: "I felt happy because my mother came to see what I did in class".

Learning experiences such as these provided conducive environments for capacity building through the sharing of information and skills and the development of good working relationships. In one urban school, a teacher's (AT2) journal drew attention to one of the advantages of such shared experiences: "It was reassuring to observe children and parents interacting in small groups and learning to collaborate with each other". In the same school, the mutuality of the learning experience was emphasised by another teacher (CT5) who asserted that "in learning together, we learn from each other and we learn from our mistakes". Later, during the course of conversation, the principal (BT1) highlighted other important elements of capacity building, pointing out the less tangible outcomes of working in partnership, such as "learning to be patient, learning to be tolerant and a sense of being there for one another". The importance of solidarity or "being there for one another" was emphasised by a comment made by an aunt (BP6) who was filling in for her sister in a Shared Reading activity: "I'm his aunt; his mother is working. I came in so he wouldn't feel left out. I'm glad I did...I learned a few things myself". A teacher (AT4) in another school believed that sharing the classroom environment with parents was an effective means of building parent capacity. She contended that "the classroom often sets a higher benchmark than some homes and some parents get a glimpse of what their children are capable of in regard to their behaviour and their application to work". A community worker (AC3) who had helped out in the classroom observed that "children like to have clear boundaries put in place for them" and that they "feel more secure" in such environments, and she stated that this learning could be applied to her own work in the Afterschool club.

Sharing learning experiences in the classroom also developed student capacity. The affirmation provided by an adult presence in one classroom led an eight-year-old girl

(BC3) to comment: "I like it when grown-ups come into our classroom and look at our artwork on the walls ... it makes us feel proud of our school". A teacher's (DT16) journal also pointed to the importance of parental presence in the classroom as a means of affirming children's accomplishment in their schoolwork: "It made children aware that there were many adults out there that cared about their education". In relation to a similar activity in another school, a nine-year-old (EP2) alluded to the importance of a friendly environment for children's education. In a group interview, this child poignantly remarked: "I like seeing my mother talking to the teacher ... some teachers might become friends with the parents" (EC2).

It is clear from the data that the development of a culture which supports mutual learning provided many opportunities for capacity building. This proved to be highly feasible when like-minded participants worked together in the partnership activities. From time to time, however, there were negative experiences and some differences of opinion between those taking part, but an acceptance of human frailties and a belief in the well-intentioned efforts of all participants ensured positive outcomes. In one instance, the presence of a father in the classroom seemed to cause some embarrassment for his daughter. After the activity, her teacher (CT5) explained that "she didn't want Daddy coming into her classroom" but, as the principal (CT1) pointed out, "it's all part of the learning experience of working together".

Implicit in the definition of partnership adopted by the FSCEP project - as a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability (Pugh and De'Ath, 1989: 68) - was the mutuality of the learning experience. The mutuality of the learning experience was an essential element in developing participant's capacity. It became clear in many of the partnership programmes that the collective learning involved was greater than the sum of individual learning attained, and this afforded insights into the symbiotic relationship between teaching, learning and knowledge generation. The research findings indicated that a key success factor in this process was the quality of the relationships which existed between participants.

(II) Quality of relationships

During the course of the FSCEP project, the quality of the relationships amongst those taking part was seen as an essential element in the promotion of activities and in mediating the outcomes. In this respect, a teacher (AT2) in one of the urban schools remarked that "all parents, teachers and pupils develop some sort of relationship during their time in school, but it's the quality of these relationships that makes a difference". Positive relationships between parents and teachers were seen to lead to the reinforcement of mutually-accepted values. One parent (CP2) observed that "when the teacher is reinforcing the same message as the parent, the children are more likely to accept it". In contrast, the impact of negative relationships was highlighted in a teacher (CT3) interview: "if a parent has negative feelings about a teacher or the school it can be difficult for the child ... they're sometimes caught in the middle".

At various meetings carried out in all five schools during the course of planning activities, all teachers accepted that the quality of relationships with parents, and indeed with students, was of paramount importance in building capacity among participants. Many data entries focused on the levels of perceived happiness and fulfilment experienced by children at school as a criterion for measuring the quality of relationships. A teacher's journal (AT2) read that "It was lovely to see adults and children working side by side and to hear their happy laughter". In a similar vein, a parent (BP1) admitted: "We laughed a lot while we were doing it". In one of the Maths for Fun projects, a parent (EP2) said that she had really enjoyed her involvement and commented that "school is now a much happier place and children enjoy being at school". In the children's interview, one girl (EC2) commented: "I was happy to see parents in the classroom; the way everyone was there was safe and nice", while another (EC2) stated: "I like my Mommy sitting beside me...I like to show her my writing". A happy and positive environment, therefore, was seen as a prerequisite for learning, as it provided a context in which relationships could grow and flourish and individual capacity could be nurtured.

In this respect the Maths for Fun activities proved popular in all schools at various times, with positive effects on classroom atmosphere. In the early stages, these activities consisted mainly of board games in which parents, children and teachers engaged with each other in the informal learning of mathematical concepts. A

principal's (ET1) journal read: "This session was Maths for Fun at its best and was a great experience in interpersonal relationships", while an older student (EC3) from the same school commented that "the relationship between the school and parents is important because it lets teachers and parents get to know each other and it creates a nice atmosphere". One of the boys from this school (EC3) hinted at the intrinsic motivation involved in these activities when he commented that "it was much better than ordinary schoolwork". One teacher's journal (AT4) highlighted the importance of other aspects of capacity building provided by the Maths for Fun activities: "it gave a chance to the less academic pupils to shine and develop self-confidence and it was also a good experience for children to relate to other adults from the community in a structured setting".

As a consequence of the partnership activities, the synergistic relationship between the home, the school and the community was allowed to flourish. Over time it became clear that the development of good partnership practices was contingent on the development of good parent-teacher-community relationships. The data draws attention to a number of qualities and attributes as essential components of good working relationships. These include mutual respect between parents and teachers, a welcoming atmosphere in a school, a trusting relationship between the home, the school and the wider community, sensitivity towards the feelings of others, and an appreciation of the input of all participants.

Mutual respect

Participants' experiences in the partnership activities showed that mutual respect is a fundamental part of a productive and harmonious co-existence. Displaying respect for the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions of those with whom we work is at the heart of quality relationships. In the partnership programmes, thoughtfulness towards others was seen as an essential element of respect. In this context, getting the balance right between the levels of participation that can reasonably be expected of parents and the degree, nature and duration of participation that might be deemed beneficial to children's education is a key consideration for proponents of educational partnership. This was summarised by one class teacher (CT4) in an urban school, who stated that "parents can only be expected to do so much ... making unreasonable demands on parents' time and energy is not respectful". This teacher believed that "we must be

prepared to give parents time to get used to new ideas and approaches, step by step, in little baby steps". In line with this thinking, another teacher (CT3) described how rewarding it was for her to see a young mother venture into the classroom for the first time: "When somebody comes in that you thought would never come in and you see the welcome they get from other parents and also from children ... it's very affirming for them to get such a positive reaction". Another teacher (CT7) pointed out that some parents who came into her classroom were very inclusive in their approach to welcoming other parents and that this encouraged others to take part. In another school, a class teacher (AT2) commented on the way parents affirmed each other in the work they were doing: "Some parents give a great welcome to new parents when they venture in. They encourage each other in the activities by joking and cajoling". A factor which contributed to the relaxed and welcoming atmosphere in this classroom could have been this teacher's wealth of experience over a thirty-year period spent working in this school. Her interest in, and knowledge about, the generations of families which had passed through the school served as an access point for the wider community.

Welcoming atmosphere

All five schools developed a welcoming ethos and this was evidenced by the informal, pleasant and caring atmosphere which existed during partnership activities. It was evident from the start of the FSCEP project that all five schools had well-established home-school links in place and enjoyed very positive relationships. When interviewed, the HSCL co-ordinator (AT7) in one of the urban schools stated that "it's very important that parents are made to feel welcome in the school". In recognition of this, one school had a long tradition of adopting a 'first name policy' as part of its school ethos. Children and parents greeted teachers by their first names and teachers reciprocated in similar fashion. Observing young children greeting adults by their first names in the classrooms or along the corridor seemed genuinely respectful and caring. It seemed to reflect what Nixon (2006: 153) terms the 'recognition of equal worth' which, for him, is central to 'our understanding of the conditions of learning'. This school was described by a parent (CP2) as "a friendly and inviting place...and everybody being on first names makes it a kind of continuation of the family circle". Another parent (CP3) stated that "tis nice to be greeted by name at the door...it makes

you feel different about the school and a teacher stated that being on first names with parents makes you feel more part of the community".

Nixon (2006:153) argues that relationships built on equal worth 'inform our agency, while at the same time providing us with relational structures within which to recognise the agency of others'. Seeing the "person of the child and greeting them by name" was seen by the principal (CT1) as "fundamental to the way a school should operate". Sennett (2003: 4) endorses this belief, and asserts that 'lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form'. He states that 'no insult is offered to another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not *seen* – as a full human being whose presence matters'.

In recognition of this, the HSCL co-ordinator (AT7) of one urban school stood by the main door most mornings from 8.45 to 9.15 to welcome parents and children into the school. Each "grown-up" and child was greeted by name and pleasantries were exchanged. Obviously, the ability to remember each person's name is a vitally important skill in being an effective HSCL co-ordinator. Some parents would stop for a quick chat and much of the partnership planning for the FSCEP activities took place in this informal way. During a group interview in this school, parents (AP3) referred to the importance of knowing that this welcome awaited them when they came into the school. Having a friendly relationship with their children's teachers was regarded as important for success in school. One parent (AP3) observed that "sometimes children can feel a bit nervous coming into school in the morning or they mightn't be feeling too good or worried about homework or something". In response to this, a principal (AT1) pointed out that "a brief word with the teacher can put a parent's mind at ease". The principal (CT1) of another school believed that it was important for teachers to be available to parents in the morning "to have a quick word with the teacher when they're dropping off their children, as this can avert many misunderstandings at a later stage."

Trust

Trust was seen by a number of teachers as a core component in building capacity . A HSCL co-ordinator (CT14) claimed that, "within our relationships, it is all too easy to take trust for granted and overlook its pivotal role in our interactions with others".

Trust was understood as enabling relationships to develop and flourish. One principal (AT1) stated that, "in a trusting relationship, we are willing to conduct ourselves differently, engage in a wider range of actions, and also to be more open to a variety of experiences". Mistrust, on the other hand, was seen to have a devastating impact on relationships and on the types and quality of conversations that occur. In other words, when trust is eroded, relationships deteriorate. In this regard, the frequency of the positive parent-teacher interactions which occurred through the partnership activities helped to develop strong trusting relationships. One teacher believed (DT15) that it was very important that "parents have absolute confidence in their child's teacher ... to know that their children are treated with love and respect". However, maintaining trusting relationships required a degree of time, attention and presence of mind and these, in the words of one teacher (CT3), were "often in short supply" for mainstream class teachers. Due to the pressurised nature of a teacher's work and the lack of back-up support, the ability to be really present for parents is a challenging task. Hence, much of the teacher-parent interactions in relation to planning partnership activities took the form of incidental meetings at the classroom door or along the school corridor, often resulting in teachers working through part of their lunch-breaks. This raised an ethical issue relating to the extra demands on teachers' time and energy, and highlighted the challenges to the sustainability of partnership practices under such circumstances.

In spite of these challenges, however, teachers were invariably good-humoured, pleasant and extremely willing to accommodate parents' needs. In one school, due to lack of space, the corridor became very congested when parents came to collect their children at the end of the school day. At these times, it was interesting to observe the social interaction, conversation and good-humoured banter that arose between parents and teachers as they attempted to make their way down the corridor through what one teacher (CT6) described as "an obstacle course of baby buggies and toddlers". These were also occasions on which parents shared information with each other and offered advice and support on a variety of issues.

O'Donohue (2003:143) contends that 'true community is not produced; it is invoked and awakened'. In relation to this, one HSCL co-ordinator (CT14) believed that schools can play a central role in bonding communities together. She pointed out that,

if the role of the parent is side-lined by a school, "it's so easy for parents to become disconnected from their school and from their children's education". Hence, the school in which this co-ordinator worked set out to reinforce a continuity of routine for children between home and school, in which the "sharing of agreed values by parents and teachers" (CT14) was regarded as very important. This resonates with Epstein's (1995: 702) claim that

> The overlapping of school and family can produce family-like schools and school-like families. Family-like schools have an accepting, caring atmosphere and welcome families. They are able to recognize each child's individuality and special traits. Similarly, school-like families emphasize the importance of school, homework, and learning activities.

The FSCEP project endeavoured to share these insights across the five school communities. As a result, sensitivity towards parents' feelings and wishes was a central tenet of the partnership programmes.

Sensitivity

The importance of sensitivity of language and the use of appropriate terminology were highlighted in one school as an important growth point during the partnership activities. Due to the changed composition of many modern families, one principal (CT1) felt that the term "grown-ups" was the most acceptable term to use when encouraging young children to invite family members to participate in classroom activities. Any significant adult in the life of the child (parent, foster-parent, or guardian) was welcome to participate in the partnership programmes. So too were other members of the extended family circle. This principal (CT1) also felt that the term "children" was a more appropriate term than "pupils" or "students", as this gave a more homely feeling to the school as an extension of the family. During the course of discussion at a staff meeting, it was accepted as good practice to avoid, whenever possible, the use of what one teacher (CT4) described as "prejudice-laden words". Thus, words with negative connotations, such as 'disadvantaged', 'underprivileged', 'deprived', 'marginalised', and so forth were studiously avoided.

Sensitivity to parents' needs with regard to time and other family commitments also required due consideration when planning activities. It was generally agreed that short

programmes of four to six weeks were more sensitive to parents' needs. Longer programmes experienced a marked fall-off in numbers which often resulted in much disappointment for children, especially if parents had promised to come but, for one reason or another, failed to show up. In relation to this, a HSCL co-ordinator (CT14) suggested that "we need to be more creative in finding ways of involving parents who are working outside the home". This aspect of the partnership activities was also highlighted by the principal in this school (CT1):

> Doing stuff at home with their children is an important aspect of educational partnership...it is important to be creative about incorporating a 'home element' into activity programmes, as it brings school activities into the home and home activities into the school.

As the FSCEP project progressed, all schools incorporated innovative 'home elements' into a number of their partnership programmes. For instance, shared-reading programmes often included story-sacks and reading packs which children took home each evening. Similarly, three of the schools organised 'write-a-book' projects, in which family members cooperated to compile stories and family histories relevant to the age of the child in question. Other examples included community art projects and community awareness projects on literacy themes.

The time of day at which the activity programmes took place was also an important factor in making partnership programmes accessible to parents. Many teachers found that a time period at the beginning or end of the school day better accommodated parents and ensured better attendance. Similarly, due respect for teachers' needs in relation to their time and availability was required, and principals and school staffs needed to be flexible in planning, designing and implementing activity programmes.

Appreciation

An individual's capacity to express and receive gratitude was regarded as an important facet of his or her personal development by a facilitator who was employed to deliver some of the activity programmes. In one instance, this facilitator was engaged by one of the schools to prepare a variety show. As noted in the teacher's journal (AT4), this facilitator was very innovative in her approach to displaying appreciation for participants' contributions to the concert preparations:

> A great deal of time and energy was required of parents and teachers in working with the children in this school to prepare a variety show. The rehearsals required parents and teachers to work with young children developing a movement-to-music routine. At the end of each session the facilitator devoted some time to expressing appreciation in the following manner. Parents and teachers affirmed the children with whom they were working by telling them how much they enjoyed doing the activities and this affirmation was concluded with a "high five" hand slap. In response, each child had been primed by the facilitator to say to the parents and teachers present; "thank you for helping us" and "please come again next week".

As well as being a subtle stratagem to ensure parents' attendance at subsequent sessions, showing appreciation, according to this facilitator (AF2), was "essential to developing good relationships and politeness and gratitude were best advanced by role-modelling these qualities in everyday behaviour and interactions".

School principals availed of every opportunity to express their appreciation to parents for their contributions to the various activities. Over the course of the partnership programmes core groups of actively-engaged parents became established in the schools. These core groups were seen as an asset to the schools, and their input was greatly appreciated particularly when organising big events. As their role became more established, a sense of ownership of certain activities developed among parents. While such an outcome had many benefits, it also required a degree of attention on the part of school staffs to ensure that democracy prevailed. A HSCL co-ordinator (CT14) in one urban school observed that "cliques can be an impediment to other parents getting involved", and felt that it was "important to remain alert and sensitive to the feelings of new parents volunteering for the first time". Many teachers believed that modelling democracy in the day-to-day running of a school was the best means of instilling democratic principles in all participants in the educational partnership process.

During the course of the FSCEP project, the slogan "the process is more important than the product" was repeated regularly when planning activities. The process of designing and implementing partnership programmes was seen as a worthwhile exercise which afforded many opportunities for capacity building. The programmes

therefore, were not seen as a means to producing end-products, even though many of them resulted in outcomes such as shows, concerts, art exhibitions, flower and garden displays, entries in community celebrations, excursions, and so on. The process of combined planning, designing and implementing the activities was itself seen as inevitably enhancing democratic practices in all schools.

(III) Democratic practice in schools

Since the establishment of Boards of Management for primary schools in Ireland in 1975, there has been a growing demand for more democratic participation of parents and teachers in schools. Glickman (1998:49) poses a challenging question: 'Are we willing to practise a form of democracy in our everyday actions in schools that make possible a societal form of democracy that we have not yet reached'? In this respect the FSCEP activities provided a role model that was helpful in promoting greater democratic practices in the schools. Dewey (1916) believed that democracy needed to be invented anew for each generation, and saw democracy as beginning in the home, being consolidated in the school and emanating outwards to the community and to the country at large. Young (2000, cited in Nixon *et al.,* 2002: 2) speaks of "deliberative democracy", and advances a belief in the collective wisdom of communities to solve their own problems. Such practice would provide "the epistemic conditions for the collective knowledge of which proposals are most likely to promote results that are wise and just". The FSCEP project was founded on the belief that building upon existing structures within schools and within communities was more likely to be successful in accomplishing desired change than top-down approaches.

Integration and inclusion

Partnership activities within the FSCEP project were carried out in close liaison with local agencies, particularly the Local Education Committees (LECs). The LECs were set up under the HSCL scheme to address issues within communities which were seen to impinge on children's educational achievement. Membership of these LECs is comprised of voluntary and statutory agents, with equal representation of parents and community members. As these LECs became more established over time, they provided an effective forum for debate on communities' input into education. As such, they provided a useful democratic mechanism for the advancement of

educational partnership. During the course of the FSCEP project, it became the established custom to have student representation on two of these LECs. These were students who had moved on to secondary education and were permitted to attend the monthly meetings of the LECs, accompanied by the HSCL co-ordinator from those schools. As well as extending democratic practice, their involvement was seen as a valuable contribution to the partnership process. The students in question seemed to enjoy participating and matured into their roles as time went by. Their presence added to the inclusive ethos of the committees, as other committee members deferred to their expertise and knowledge in matters relating to adolescent issues. It also ensured that, as one community worker (CC3) observed, the committee remained "people-focused" rather than "task-driven".

The objective of the FSCEP project was to attempt to achieve maximum participation and inclusion of parents and other family members in their children's learning and in the life of the school. In this respect school concerts and shows were extremely popular and all schools experienced capacity crowds for these occasions. The concerts and shows were great family occasions, to which parents and other family members made a huge contribution in terms of preparation, organisation and, occasionally, participation on stage. Optimal participation was regarded as very important by one principal (DT1), for whom "it helps to place the school at the centre of things in the community". This was in keeping with the understanding of social inclusion which informed the FSCEP project, namely, as an operational experience that required from all parents a physical presence in the schools from time to time.

A further opportunity for democratic practice and collaboration, again on a large scale, was provided by participation in community celebration events, such as St. Patrick's Day parades. Two schools devoted much time, energy and effort to making preparations and constructing floats for these events. This involved a wide range of parents and community members and drew on a cross-section of skills and talents. These events gave rise to much sharing of information and responsibilities. Shared decisions demanded common-sense input from parents, teachers and pupils, as they grappled with the difficulties of organising and implementing different aspects of the event. It is worth noting that these large-scale activities recalled Dewey's (1916) socially interactive model of education, insofar as they endeavoured to develop

inclusive practices and to eliminate exclusion tendencies. In so doing, they provided opportunities for empowerment for many members of the communities.

Empowerment

The data suggests that important shifts of power and focus can occur through the implementation of many innovative school-community projects, as outlined above. The model of partnership informing the FSCEP project was that of 'a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate' (Pugh and De'ath, 1989: 68), grounded upon a relationship of trust. This made demands on teachers to remain open to new ideas and to embrace new ways of working. In the words of one teacher (AT4), "it made us leave our comfort zones to find new ways of working with parents". It challenged traditional assumptions and beliefs but also provided space for personal fulfilment and empowerment for both parents and teachers.

The journal of one urban teacher (BT17) captured this sense of empowerment concisely: "When I discuss a proposal with my principal, she gives me the go-ahead to run the programme as I see fit and asks me to take full responsibility for managing the money and for furnishing receipts". A journal from a teacher (ET2) in a rural school recounted how "the ownership of the garden activity was relinquished to the parents and the children". In this rural school, a group of parents and children were given full responsibility for redesigning and maintaining an area of the school grounds and garden. As a follow-up to their project, they used photographs and diagrams to present the results of their work and these were put on display in the school entrance hall for visitors to view.

In similar fashion, a group of parents in an urban school took full responsibility for preparing and performing a puppet show for young children. They used a selection of hand puppets purchased for a previous activity programme, to compose and design a show. Six parents collaborated in developing character parts for each puppet and attuned their own voices to fit the character they had invented. The show took place in one of the classrooms, and proved hugely entertaining for the children and for the teaching staff. In the words of the principal (CT1), it "was a big hit to have parents performing for children, rather than the other way around". In her journal, the class teacher (CT4) stated that "the parents were delighted with what they had achieved"

and pointed out that "it was very educational and also very empowering, as it involved parents and children designing the show and writing up the script without a reliance on the school". As well as empowering parents, the partnership activities also facilitated the empowerment of children, particularly students in the older age groups. Indeed, in recent years, listening to the voice of parents and students has been adopted as official government policy in whole-school evaluations within the Irish education system.

Children's voice

The principal (ET1) of one rural school stated that "it is important to remember that children have their own point of view and we must try to ensure that the wishes of the children are not overlooked". Aware of the need to hear the voice of those who were central to the activities carried out – namely, the children - the FSCEP project attempted to practise participatory democracy in all aspects of its activities. As the project progressed, it was evident that core processes and structures within the schools began to change, and this in turn allowed democratic practices to flourish. The ultimate objective was to extend decision-making processes to as wide a range of participants as possible, and to ensure that all voices were heard. This applied particularly to student participants. It was deemed critical that the opinions of students were seen to be valued, and their input was sought whenever appropriate. Student participation in decision-making was seen to be important because, as one teacher (ET2) asserted, "it gave them a sense of ownership of the activity and motivated their learning". In this school, the principal (ET1) believed that "many of our students appreciate the benefits of education and like their time in school to be as positive and rewarding as possible". This principal pointed out that, when contemplating a new activity, her first step was "to throw it out to the children to see what they think of it". She stated that "students often have good ideas that can contribute to their school and their education". In another school, during the course of a planning meeting, a teacher (DT11) concluded that "giving students a voice enables them to take responsibility for their own learning". This teacher believed that "allowing children to have a say in how their school-day was planned was good training for them in learning to live in a democracy". In an intergenerational programme in this school involving children and grandparents, the older students researched and compiled local and family history projects which compared current school experiences with the experiences of previous

generations. The students were encouraged to take a leading role in organising this work and, when finished, they presented their findings to a large gathering of parents and community members in the school hall, to the delight and enjoyment of all present.

Conclusion

Drawing on a vast array of data collected over a four-year period from reflective journals, interviews, a focus-group session, incidental conversations and personal observations, this chapter examined the opportunities for capacity building provided by the partnership programmes in the five participating schools. The data indicated that schools are well-positioned by reason of their centrality to the lives of families with school-going children to enhance individual, as well as community, capacity. Examples of good capacity-building strategies in all schools were outlined and the possibilities provided by shared learning experiences were explored in detail. Two key factors were seen to advance or retard capacity building potential in the activity programmes, namely the quality of relationships amongst the participants and the levels of democratic practice prevailing in the schools. Both of these influencing factors were examined separately in relation to their effects on the capacity-building potential of an educational partnership process and in terms of their consequent impact on educational outcomes for children. The upcoming chapter presents an analysis of the qualitative data relating to the challenges and barriers to the promotion and implementation of educational partnership.

Chapter 7

Educational Partnership: its Challenges and Barriers

"The main issue for educational partnership is attitudinal change ... the other practical things will come about in time if schools believe that a partnership approach is the best way forward" (HSCL coordinator, CT 14).

Introduction

This chapter examines the institutionalised processes and embedded assumptions within the current Irish education system which hinder the full development of educational partnership. Hence, the focus of the chapter is mainly on the third of the core research questions: what prevents educational partnerships from working well? The findings discussed here have emerged from the observations and insights of a wide range of participants during the course of the FSCEP project, as well as from the formal data-gathering process. These embedded conditions fall mainly into two broad categories: structures and conditions relating to the context of traditional Irish school environments and psychological and cultural barriers which are deeply ingrained in traditional views of schooling. Therefore, this chapter is presented in two sections: (I) Inhibiting structures and processes and (II) Psychological and cultural barriers.

(I) Inhibiting structures and processes

Many of the challenges to educational partnership have their roots in the historical evolution of the Irish educational system. Since educational practice is an evolutionary phenomenon, it was inevitable that, to some extent, residual elements of traditional practices would constitute barriers to the partnership process in all schools. Schools as we understand them today are an evolutionary product of political and economic compromises, informed by assumptions about teaching and learning. With the introduction of compulsory education at the end of the nineteenth century, the state assumed the responsibility formally held by 'parents, community and Church' (OECD, 1997:25) and became the new stakeholder in the provision of primary education; 'whether or not the parents wanted their child to spend every day in school, the law now obliged them to conform' (ibid: 25). Indeed, according to the OECD

report, *Parents as partners in schooling,* 'the advent of compulsory education had a marked effect on the relationship between the family and society' (ibid: 25). This was accelerated in the aftermath of World War II when the rapid expansion of schooling in Britain and Ireland in accordance with fairly rigid guidelines resulted in schools becoming responsible for education and parents' roles being confined to the socialisation and moral training of children. Since the vast majority of parents had little or no schooling themselves, teachers were seen as 'experts' when it came to academic education (ibid: 25). Consequently, little value was attached to parents' views, and parent involvement or participation in the life of the school was not encouraged. As a result of this, instead of 'being central to the overall development of their children, families ran the risk of being pushed onto the sidelines' (ibid: 25).

Thus, the institutionalisation of education led to a de-contextualisation of learning environments which ignored community input as a key component in children's learning. In Ireland, the past twenty years have witnessed much progress in redressing this imbalance, through increasing parental involvement in schools, mainly as a result of the efforts of the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme. The FSCEP project built on the HSCL approach to children's development, by adopting a constructivist model of learning which emphasised the shared learning experiences of the activity programmes and the greater symbiosis in the relationship between the home and the school which they encouraged. The FSCEP project accepted that children's learning is strongly affected at all times by "the three overlapping spheres of influence" (Epstein, 1987a:130), namely, family, school and community. Predicated on this understanding, the FSCEP partnership activities emphasised the interconnectedness of home and school in learning, and highlighted the paradox of schools taking full responsibility for the child's education and learning. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of learning methods employed in many of the partnership activities went well beyond the de-contextualised setting of the contemporary classroom and set out to develop a more holistic and inclusive vision of primary education in which each person involved has a role and a responsibility. In this, the FSCEP project was cognisant of the formidable obstacles which lie in the way of implementing partnership models, not least of which are funding constraints.

The underfunding of primary education in Ireland has been a major cause of concern for many decades (CMRS, 1992; Combat Poverty Agency; 1993; INTO 1994), a concern with which this research resonated. A principal (DT1) in one school was adamant that "money spent at primary level would offset the need for greater expenditure in redressing social ills at later stages". In another school, the principal (BT1) pointed out that "the additional resource provided by the FSCEP project enabled us to implement programmes that otherwise would not have been possible". A teacher (CT9) in one of the urban schools contended that "class size and pupil-teacher ratio were inhibiting factors in the development of a partnership approach".

Physical environments

Traditional school environments were generally designed to cater for large numbers of students under structured conditions that required regimented approaches to order and discipline. One HSCL co-ordinator (CT14) claimed that "many of these conditions and structures prioritised the needs of the school over the needs of children and families". This study concluded that traditional rigid approaches to discipline, time, location, curriculum content and teaching methodologies are not conducive to the development of educational partnerships. By implication, therefore, the FSCEP project activities required very high levels of energy, commitment and determination on the part of teachers in implementing partnership programmes. While all principals agreed that the additional funding provided by the FSECP project was helpful in advancing partnership, it was also agreed that full educational partnership would require far greater supports and resources and considerably more sustained investment. Without this, one principal (DT1) contended, "educational partnerships cannot hope to operate successfully". However, the data indicated that, in addition to the physical and structural changes required, a clear alternative vision with regard to the ownership and role of schools in their communities is also needed. As one HSCL co-ordinator (CT14) observed, "a change of emphasis is also needed if schools are to help their communities in addressing the growing needs of a rapidly changing society".

Over the years, the prevailing conditions in urban communities necessitated implementing high security measures on school premises, such as spiked railings and locked gates. While these protective barriers are necessary for security reasons and for

reasons of health and safety, the concern is that the presence of such physical barriers could inhibit community involvement in the school and thwart the development of a sense of ownership of the school by the local community. How best to overcome the negative signals that such requirements send out to local communities is a challenging task for proponents of educational partnership. Schools located in such environments are faced with an added challenge in their attempts to cultivate a sense of belonging among parents and community members. Furthermore, new child protection guidelines have resulted in some of the schools adopting a 'locked door' policy during the school day. As a result, it is sometimes difficult for parents and other visitors to gain entry to some school buildings, as we observed during the course of this research. Clearly, under these circumstances, schools which have the services of secretarial and caretaking staff are better equipped to ensure a welcome reception for visitors. From a psychological perspective, these shortcomings do not help to promote a partnership mentality between schools and their communities.

Finding time

Many of the practical issues raised in relation to working in partnership were discussed in detail at a focus group meeting of parents, teachers and community members. These referred to challenges related to time, space, added workload, funding, school facilities, behavioural issues, human resources and so on. Prominent in this discussion was the issue of time. While acknowledging the importance of careful time management, principals felt that there was "insufficient time" for formal partnership meetings or for teachers to be accessible to parents and other visitors to discuss partnership activities.

In the early stages of the FSCEP project, it was noted that parent input into planning and designing activities was minimal. This was a difficult dilemma for the FSCEP project, as frequent consultation was seen as a necessary first step in developing good partnership practices. This problem became a topic for discussion at staff meetings, where questions relating to time and space were repeatedly raised. Many teachers believed that much of the consultation with parents could be done informally during the various incidental meetings which took place between parents and teachers during the course of the school week. It was also accepted, however, that formal meetings

would be necessary from time to time, depending on the scale and challenge of the activity programmes being planned.

Hence, one school agreed to organise a two-hour workshop for the staff, outside of school time, on issues relating to working in partnership and the challenges involved. Other schools facilitated planning meetings for parents and teachers, also outside of school time, and these meetings sometimes involved members of the Board of Management (BOM) of the school, as well as members of other agencies. However, the vast majority of consultations with parents were incidental or informal conversations at the classroom door as they collected their children. Notwithstanding the difficulties relating to the lack of time, the data indicated that the partnership programmes greatly increased the frequency of consultation and interaction between all partners in the educational partnership process.

Finding time was also an issue for many parents. It was noted that, in some instances, parents had to request time off work to attend activities and, on other occasions, parents were obliged to leave before the end of activities to meet other commitments. Family circumstances often dictated whether or not a parent was able to attend. One mother (EP5) explained that "it's easier this year, I have more time, but the last few years were different, I didn't have much time". Another mother (DP3) pointed out that some parents will always prioritise their children's needs: "Lots of parents, no matter how much they have to do, will always make time and come in if it's for the good of their children".

Other areas of concern for principals in relation to partnership activities were issues of "curriculum overload", and "class interruptions". One principal (CT1) contended that "too many interruptions interfered with the smooth running of the school". Undoubtedly a lot of noise and commotion in the school corridors or outside classroom windows was a major source of distraction for other teachers and children engaged in more concentrated learning exercises. While "curriculum overload" was an area of concern for all principals, some believed that the skilful integration of partnership activities helped to alleviate this overload as they sometimes covered a range of curricular areas by, for example, integrating elements of literacy and

numeracy into the art education programmes. In truth, many teachers demonstrated great innovation and organisational skills in the delivery of programmes.

Facilities

As well as finding the time, finding adequate space, either for parent meetings or when working within classrooms, was an equally challenging problem for some schools. Traditionally, classrooms were not designed for the kind of teaching and learning styles most appropriate to educational partnership. In schools furnished with traditional-type furniture, it was difficult and cumbersome to re-arrange the furniture. Experiences of working in partnership with parents in classrooms, therefore, were sometimes confined and limited. Furthermore, teachers were acutely aware of the potential conflict involved in issuing general invitations to all parents to attend a given activity, feeling that, if the full cohort of parents presented themselves, it would create an impossible logistical situation in the classroom. The efficacy of many of the activities was therefore dependent on the non-attendance of a considerable number of parents. Nonetheless, given these constraints, all schools were successful in increasing parental participation in the activities which were delivered in the classrooms. Teachers were quick to welcome parents accompanied by infant children, who occasionally added to the congestion and created difficulties for the implementation of activities against a background of competing distractions. At a more basic level, an added challenge for some of the schools was the inadequacy of adult toilet facilities. Recognition of the need to provide such basic facilities must be the subject of urgent attention if parental participation in school activities is to become a reality.

Since the inception of the HSCL scheme, some progress with regard to the provision of facilities for parents has been achieved in schools in which this scheme operates. Under this scheme schools are urged to make a room available as a drop-in centre for parents or for structured activities. Getting optimal benefit from such rooms is obviously dependent on accessibility and hospitality, which is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the aforementioned security requirements. Despite this, and despite the serious accommodation shortages mentioned above, parent-rooms have been made available in the five participating schools, though sometimes on a shared basis with other school activities. These rooms are maintained by the HSCL co-ordinators, in conjunction with core groups of parents, and much progress has been made in

developing a sense of shared ownership of these facilities. This was summed up concisely in one parent's (AP4) comment: "Now I feel I'm on the inside ... before I got involved in the activities in the parents' room I always felt outside of things". Another parent (BP5) enjoyed "having a cup of tea and talking to some of the teachers in the parents' room".

Flexibility

In spite of the difficulties and challenges outlined above, all schools were very successful in raising levels of parental involvement and participation. The research indicated that teachers were flexible and very creative in overcoming many of these barriers. The ability and willingness to overcome barriers was seen to depend, to a large extent, on the teachers' levels of conviction with regard to the efficacy of the partnership process in delivering aspects of the curriculum. Teachers were willing to accept inconvenience and to take on different approaches to teaching and learning in the belief that this served the children, their families and the wider community. In relation to this, one principal (BT1) believed that "the flexibility and adaptability of the FSCEP project was a strong contributing factor to the success of the partnership activities". Reciprocal flexibility and innovation on the part of teachers and school management was also an important factor in the successful implementation of the partnership programmes. This flexibility and openness to change on the part of schools is essential for partnership activities to continue beyond the life of the FSCEP project.

The Green Paper on lifelong learning (DES, 1998) highlights the empowerment potential of local educational enterprises and stresses the need to empower local communities by giving them more responsibility for their education and learning. Its guidelines'[depict] an approach and a particular kind of relationship as opposed to a system of provision' and advocate making available 'the resources of local schools and other educational institutions to the entire local community for learning purposes – not merely to the daytime student population' (DES, 1998: 88, 89). This, however, is a complex and difficult undertaking, as illustrated by this study. Identifying ways and means of incorporating continuous parental input into children's education requires a lot of time and energy on the part of principals and school staffs. Ultimately, it involves the development and maintenance of both formal and informal

structures. While not directly involved in the establishment of formal structures, the FSCEP project recognised the important role that formal structures play in the promotion of educational partnership.

Partnership structures

Formal partnership structures were seen to include parent representation on boards of management and the employment of parents as special needs assistants in classrooms, as school caretakers and as other ancillary staff. Parents were also seen to fill formal school-linked positions, as tutors in after-school clubs and in coaching roles in other out-of-school activities like football and athletics. Other formal structures included membership of parent-teacher associations, parents' councils and local education committees. Indeed, schools were seen to have an important role in developing 'parent readiness' for these positions through information-sharing and relationship-building. Thus, the prevailing culture of the school was regarded as critical by the FSCEP project, as it influenced the numerous incidental interactions between parents and teachers during the course of the school day. Noguera (2001:193) contends that schools can facilitate positive or negative social capital depending on how they operate, and states that 'schools that isolate themselves from the neighbourhood they serve because they perceive the residents as 'threatening' tend to undermine the social capital of the community'. Noguera (2001: 197) asserts that 'urban schools are increasingly the most reliable source of stability and social support'. In this respect, the development of positive social capital was a dominant feature of the five participating schools. Many other formal partnership arrangements were evident in all schools, including organised parent-teacher meetings in relation to children's academic progress or in relation to religious celebrations, such as First Communion and Confirmation ceremonies.

At a less formal level, partnership arrangements were seen to include such interactions as incidental participation in school-arranged activities. Parent input into sports days, school concerts and shows, induction days, graduation and prize-giving ceremonies and so on are obvious examples of this type of informal partnership. The research indicated that involvement in these informal partnership arrangements was often a medium through which parents were inducted into formal structures at later stages. Hence, capitalising on these opportunities to build relationships was regarded

as critical in strengthening the bonds that facilitate working in partnership and the building of social capital.

The data offered ample evidence in support of this finding. One father (AP2) stated: "I like being involved with the school ... it's great that we can come in here and do stuff with the kids ... I got to see qualities in my child that I hadn't seen before". In another school, a mother (BP7) stated: "I love being asked to come in. I love meeting the teachers. It's great when there's something like this going on in the school". In the same school, a mother (BP3) stated that "going down to the school is great ... it gets me out of the house and now we spend a lot of time at home talking about things that go on in the classroom". This statement was regarded as a key insight by many members of the school staff. In this sense, finding meaningful and interesting ways of generating 'school conversation' at home was regarded by one principal (CT1) as "an important means of making schools more central to families". Endorsing this point, one teacher (AT7) stated in a journal entry: "We're obviously being talked about a lot in the community". In all schools, the FSCEP project was seen to raise the profile of schools within their communities. This was also evidenced by the quantitative data analysis. Highlighting the positive aspects of school was regarded as very important, because, as one HSCL co-ordinator (DT7) remarked, "it is important to stay focused on the positive aspects of school ... sometimes at meetings the baggage from the past is often brought up and this can change the tone of what is being discussed". Therefore, acute sensitivity to the previous experiences of parents as participants within the school system is required, as is a conscious collective effort to provide parents with positive experiences.

(II) Psychological and cultural barriers

Across all the qualitative data there was much evidence of the psychological and cultural barriers which act as inhibitors to progress in the implementation of educational partnership. These views and assumptions with regard to schools and education were seen to be deeply ingrained in the belief systems of many members of the school communities. Many embedded assumptions within school cultures act as subconscious barriers preventing real progress and thwarting the full actualisation of educational partnership. Traditionally, schools tended to be autonomous in all matters

concerning school policy and operation and in their relationships with parents and local communities. This power imbalance between teachers and community members was experienced as the norm for many generations. As one parent (AP3) stated: "Teachers were seen as authority figures in the community...you never questioned decisions made by the school". In attempting to address this imbalance, the FSCEP project endeavoured to create an awareness of the need to involve parents in the decision-making process at all levels of school planning, but recognised that this is a slow and difficult undertaking. For example, the organisation of the school year and the school day has always been regarded as an internal matter for school staffs and often little consideration was given to what may or may not have suited parents. A HSCL co-ordinator CT14) asserted that "getting consensus amongst neighbouring schools with regard to school closures throughout the year was a difficult task". In relation to this, the co-ordinator recounted the inconvenience experienced by one family whose children were attending four different schools in the locality; all of which had different holiday schedules. In this regard, involvement in the partnership activities helped to increase awareness of the need to consider parents' wishes in the overall planning of school structures.

For their part, many parents found, as one mother (BP5) put it, that "old habits die hard". Many parents still hold negative memories in relation to parent-teacher interactions. A grandmother's (BT3) memories summed up some psychological barriers that seemed to affect many parents: "In my time you came with your children to the school door and no further ... but sometimes you'd be sent for if your child was bold". 'Being sent for' was often a daunting experience for parents and usually had negative connotations. In such situations, the content of the communication between teachers and parents tended to focus on children's 'bad' behaviour, while 'good' behaviour went largely unnoticed.

Discussions of these issues increased awareness among the school staff of the need to send out positive messages to the community. Consequently, all schools compiled annual newsletters for distribution throughout their communities, featuring the highlights of the school's activities. These were well-balanced and sensitively composed newsletters that conveyed very positives images of the schools and acknowledged parental support and assistance throughout the year. The importance of

using sensitive language when communicating with parents came to light during an interview with a group of parents in which a mother (DP2) described her unease at being greeted by the question: "You here again today"? While this may have been said in jest, it was interpreted negatively by the parent and had discouraged her from attending other activities. This incident raised awareness of parents' vulnerability in these situations and points to the need for teachers to reassure them of their welcome in the schools.

The FSCEP project also increased awareness of the need for culturally-responsive homework assignments to which parents could contribute in a meaningful way. Historically, schools attributed little value to children's home educational experiences, and parents' input into their children's education was often prescribed by the teacher. In addition, the prescribed homework was 'often a source of stress' for both children and parents (INTO, 1994: 36), which had a negative impact on children's feelings about school. From its inception, the FSCEP project set out to promote an empathic relationship between the schools and their communities by encouraging family input into the education process as a way to maximise the child's learning. One parent's (AT3) comment highlighted the value of ensuring 'a fun element' in children's homework: "Helping with FSCEP activities at home was different from the usual homework... it was easier and more fun... the kids enjoyed it, and we enjoyed helping them". Furthermore, the FSCEP project endeavoured to facilitate a parent-centred approach to planning and decision-making and it was hoped that this process would foster a more integrated approach to school policy-making and thus help to build the capacity of the school, home and the local community to work more closely together.

Mediating change

Despite these advances, however, it is difficult to go beyond what O'Brien and O'Fathaigh (2004:12) refer to as the "innate conservatism and consensualism in Irish Education". It is extremely difficult for school staffs to look critically at the structures, processes and prevailing conditions in a system in which they are deeply immersed. Moving away from teacher-centred, didactic methods of instruction to a more active, constructivist approach is a difficult transition for many teachers. Teachers identified potential discipline and behaviour issues as factors which

contributed to their reluctance to adopt active learning methodologies. In relation to this, one principal (CT1) contended that "carefully structured partnership activities were less risky from a discipline perspective" and pointed out that it was problematic for teachers "to have to discipline children in the presence of their parents".

These considerations notwithstanding, the partnership programmes resulted in active learning approaches to schoolwork in many instances. For example, a facilitator (AF2) employed in one school to deliver a 'Music for Fun' programme to a group of eight-year-olds skilfully applied active learning methodologies in what she referred to as "performance learning". In one such lesson, called *The Story of Honey,* parents, teachers and children dramatised the story of honey in the school hall. The children were required 'to become' the bees, parents 'to become' the flowers, and teachers 'to become' the beehives and each had to dress up accordingly. All of this activity was accompanied by Rimsky-Korsacov's *Flight of the Bumble Bee* and other related tunes. When the programme reached its conclusion, the facilitator (AF2) recorded an entry in the reflective journal: "The smiles on parents' faces said it all ... as the positive energy began to spread it transformed the activities into a happy creative learning environment". One of the participating children (AC2) said, "we learned all about honeybees and we had loads of fun doing it". Later, in the staffroom, the programme generated interesting debates among staff members and highlighted issues in relation to the moral courage required for adapting new teaching and learning methodologies. In relation to the adaptation of new methodologies, the role of teachers as reflective practitioners and as contributors to this research process was explained in the 'methodology' chapter.

Reflective practitioners

The ethnographic approach of this research study elicited teachers' views on a whole range of issues through a process of ongoing dialogue and journal-keeping. However, as one teacher (AT2) pointed out, "teachers have very little time and very few opportunities to stop and think and to take stock of their work". This teacher (AT2) found that keeping the reflective journal was a useful way of developing her own thinking about her role as a teacher, which, as she explained, "provoked interesting discussions in the staffroom". She noted that teachers get very little feedback from parents: "Most of our parents are not at a stage to give feedback to teachers", and

contended that school staffs "only have a vague sense of how parents feel about the school and the education service being offered to their children". All teachers who engaged in the journal-keeping experiment believed that the journals were useful in helping them reflect on their work.

In this context, it is interesting to note that teacher reflection continues to be part of the literature on teacher education in Ireland. More recently, through the HSCL scheme, critical reflection has been promoted as a means of incorporating issues of equity and social justice into the teaching discourse and as a prelude to creating a more culturally-responsive curriculum. In this respect, the partnership process provided opportunities for critical reflection on culturally relevant teaching and learning. The data showed that the development of culturally-relevant teaching strategies was contingent upon increased staff awareness of the presenting culture and social background of the school community.

Creativity

The creative arts were seen by all schools as a non-threatening conduit for developing partnership activities. Consequently, many partnership programmes gravitated towards artistic and creative activities. O'Donohue (2003:151) reminds us that being creative is an intrinsic part of our humanity, one which we neglect at a cost; 'the failure to follow one's calling to creativity severely damages one's spirit. Sins against creativity exact huge inner punishment'. One partnership programme in particular epitomised the potential of family-based art activities to generate high levels of enthusiasm and a sense of wellbeing. The following account by the classroom teacher (AT5) attempts to convey the energising power unleashed by this community art project:

> By way of preparation for this activity a brief meeting with all parents of twenty pupils in second class (eight year olds) was organised at which the community art activity programme was explained, discussed and ideas exchanged. Subsequently, in the classroom each child was given a bag of odds and ends, a child-friendly scissors and various types of adhesive, painting and colouring equipment and so on. The object of the activity was to involve the families in making an art structure of their choice with whatever waste materials were at hand. A deadline of three weeks was set at which time the finished product would be put on display in the school hall for adjudication. The finished products exceeded

> all expectations showing great imagination, innovation, skill and talent. It was with great care and diligence that these items were transported to the school and placed on display by adult family members. A general invitation was issued to all members of the community to attend the adjudication ceremony in the school. This was well attended and each child was given the opportunity to explain and extol their work. Finally, the principal decided that all entries were of such a high standard that each should receive a prize. Later these artworks were put on display in the local community centre for all to view.

The partnership activities demonstrated that schools can become pivotal agents in the lives of families and communities. As such, the FSCEP project aimed to promote a holistic and culturally-sensitive approach to children's learning and development. The partnership programmes extended teachers' influence into aspects of family and community life that went far beyond academic attainment and these offered a sense of renewed hope and support to many families. In this way, the activity programmes played an important role in promoting and mediating positive change in all participating schools. This shift of emphasis was seen to influence conventional notions of teacher professionalism.

Conflicting pressures

The data indicated that considerable uncertainty and unease arose from attempts to define this new role for teachers in relation to working with families. Our rapidly changing society places increasing demands on schools to cater to the social, emotional and physical needs of students, alongside their educational needs. Recent research (Miller, 2007) points to the importance of a more holistic approach to children's learning. Today's teacher, therefore, fills many roles and is caught between the conflicting forces of 'managerial professionalism' and 'democratic professionalism' (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007:85); meeting economic needs versus meeting societal needs. For many teachers, the resulting tension has given rise to confusion with regard to their professional identity. A teacher (DT13) in one school feared that, "in focusing on partnership activities, core curriculum subjects could be neglected" and pointed out that "teachers feel under pressure to raise literacy and numeracy standards at all age levels".

In opposition to this kind of pressure, the FSCEP project has attempted to promote democratic professionalism, whereby the five schools were encouraged to reach out to parents and communities, develop relationships and build alliances, in order to promote learning and to meet the social and emotional needs of children and parents. As observed by one HSCL co-ordinator (CT14), "teachers are caught in the middle and it can be a source of anxiety for them as they try to get the balance right". In attempting to find this balance, the partnership programmes assisted the schools in recognising the value of parents' input into their children's education.

The Irish Constitution (1937: article 42) states that 'parents are the prime and natural educators of children'. A government Green Paper, *Charting Our Education Future* (1995), introduced the word 'partnership' into educational discourse as one of the cornerstones of the primary school curriculum. Some years later, the Education Act (1998) enshrined this concept in legislation. As a consequence, the question arising for the five participating schools was a complex one: In what ways and to what extent can schools assist parents in fulfilling their role as 'the prime and natural educators of children'? In attempting to address this question, the FSCEP project focused attention on the input of fathers, mothers and other family members into children's education and, in so doing, it promoted the concept of parent empowerment in staffrooms by using the language of 'enabling parents', 'facilitating parents', 'accommodating parents' and 'hearing the voice of parents'. In this sense, it endeavoured to enhance the value of the parent role in education and, brought issues relating to the rights of parents, teachers and children to the forefront of discussion during partnership planning meetings. In all staffrooms, the imbalance of male/female participation in partnership activities was noted.

Male participation

The data collected for this project illustrated that stereotypical thinking can have a strong bearing on how we all work and behave. In order to move forward in our thinking and practice, it is important have an understanding of how the world is changing around us, our place in these new conditions, what needs to be changed and how we might change ourselves, our strategies, our models of thinking and our methods of operating. In this regard, the role played by fathers, grandfathers and other male members of families in the process of educating children is a matter of urgent

concern. For well over a decade, attention has been drawn to the absence of male role-models within the Irish primary education system in general (INTO, 1994; Kellaghan *et al.*, 1995). Data from the research study contained many references to the alienation from the education process experienced by male members of many families. One community development worker (CC3) claimed that "the feelings of alienation by some young male members of the community fuelled an anti-school culture in some families that was difficult to counteract".

Consequently, the creation of a more central and inclusive role for male family members in their children's education became an important objective of the FSCEP project. Many of the partnership programmes were designed specifically to attract a greater degree of male participation and male support and expertise were actively sought for many of the activities. Nixon's (2006: 151) contention has relevance here: 'we need to learn not only how to hope, but how to imbue our individual hopes with a sense of social purposefulness'. In one partnership programme a number of fathers shared their carpentry skills with the school in the construction of a portable stage that could be used in different locations. Many of the older students, some of whom were experiencing learning difficulties and behavioural problems, became actively involved in this endeavour. This was seen to stimulate intrinsic motivation and create a deeper sense of belonging in these students and also in the fathers. The data indicated that engagement with the partnership activities enabled male family members to explore their attitudes and values within a context of socially constructed knowledge. In turn, this seemed to promote more culturally-responsive programmes that provided more innovative involvement opportunities for male family members.

Conclusion

This section analysed the qualitative data gathered through the partnership activities of the FSCEP project in relation to the third identified theme, namely the challenges and barriers in Irish education which impede real progress towards educational partnership. The historical origins of these barriers to partnership were examined in relation to existing school cultures. Various measures for facilitating change were explored in discussing the findings of the study under this theme. The mechanism of an educational partnership process was explored as a way of weakening the

entrenched assumptions which prevent schools, families and local communities from working closely together for the benefit of future generations. It was evident from the data that all five schools engaged courageously with the challenges involved in developing and nurturing effective partnerships with parents and communities. It is important not to underestimate the amount of energy, courage and creativity needed to embark on a journey of change and transformation within a school. In this regard, the efforts of the five participating schools were laudable. These staffs greatly extended the role of their schools in their communities and developed new understandings of their own identities as teachers.

This is the end of Part 2 of this study, which presented a thematic analysis and discussion of the quantitative and qualitative data. Chapter 4 presented the quantitative findings of a survey of all five schools. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 presented and discussed the findings of the qualitative data gathered through twenty reflective journals, fourteen interviews, one large focus group and extended participant observation over a considerable period of time. The conclusions drawn from this in-depth analysis are presented in detail in the upcoming chapter, in which each of the core research questions are addressed separately.

Part 3

This final part of the thesis presents conclusions drawn from the analysis of the study data and findings, and these are discussed in relation to the literature surveyed in chapter 2 and the methodologies introduced in chapter 3. The structure of the chapter follows the order of the four core research questions: What were the benefits and outcomes for the schools, families and local communities of working in educational partnership? What made the educational partnership process work well? What prevented it from working well? What models of partnership were most appropriate to the five participating schools? In each section, conclusions are drawn in relation to each of these questions, respectively. The chapter ends with some observations concerning the limitations of the study and the prospects for further research work in this field.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

'Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world' (Palmer, 1998: 26).

Introduction

The above quotation encapsulates the research hypothesis which formed the basis of this study: the quest to explore the potential of educational partnership as a transformative educational process. This search was defined throughout the study by a continual focus on the following core research questions:

1. What were the benefits and outcomes for the schools, families and local communities of working in partnership?
2. What made the educational partnership process work well?
3. What prevented it from working well?
4. What models of partnership were most appropriate for the five participating schools?

These questions are evaluated separately in this chapter with regard to the quantitative and qualitative findings of the previous chapters and related to the insights and observations of leading authors in this field.

The chapter begins with a brief recapitulation of the relevant literature and methodological approaches discussed in the earlier chapters. The literature review in chapter 2 examined the relevant cognate fields of study and offered a comprehensive critique of the contextual literature on social inclusion, educational disadvantage and educational partnership. Drawing on the conceptual understandings of the home-school-community axis developed by leading authors in this field (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1986; Epstein, 1987a, 1996; Epstein *et al.* 2002; Barbour *et al.* 1997), the literature review offered a comprehensive framework for discussions about how educational partnerships might evolve in primary schools in disadvantaged settings. It highlighted the overwhelming international evidence pointing to the advantages that

accrue for children when schools maximise the benefits of close cooperation between families, schools and communities, and the related advantages for the local community in terms of increased social capital. The importance of developing social capital within communities was emphasised in chapter 1 in relation to the historical and philosophical legacy of the ancient Celtic culture of pre-Christian and early Christian Ireland. Celtic culture and beliefs offer a perspective on life, friendship and community living which could prove helpful in the development of models of educational partnership.

Chapter 3 presented a methodological overview of the approach to exploring partnership in five primary schools. Ethnographic and grounded theory approaches to the collection and analysis of data were explained and discussed. It was argued that this approach was the most appropriate and effective way of exploring the nature, structure and processes of educational partnerships. Through the FSCEP programmes, the dynamics of home-school-community interactions in children's development and education were monitored and examined over a considerable period of time. The data yielded much in the way of common-sense theory and wisdom in response to the four core research questions. A separate response to each of these questions is offered here and the conclusions drawn are presented with the aim of adding a greater depth of understanding and clarity to the concept and process of educational partnership.

Question 1: What were the benefits and outcomes for the schools, families and local communities of working in partnership?

This study concluded that a variety of benefits and outcomes accrue from working in partnership. These include outcomes for children and adults which range across a number of variables, including academic achievement, social and personal skills, the development of a strong sense of community and the generation of intrinsic motivation in children's learning. A focus on children's needs becomes a powerful mechanism for rallying parents and energising communities. If schools, parents and communities work in partnership, a greater bank of talent and resources is available to support children's learning. An educational partnership process provides opportunities to explore new ways of releasing those talents in an affirming and enriching way and, in so doing, it enhances the social capital of school communities.

The development of social capital through educational partnership work enables mutual interaction between the formal and non-formal learning spheres of the child's life, with increased benefits for family learning. Working in partnership facilitates both child and adult learning and encourages more holistic approaches to the education process. The extension of learning from the classroom context to the home and community context and the greater ease of transition between the two promote the concept that learning is not solely accomplished through academic processes. Furthermore, it promotes an understanding for children that the learning that takes place in the home and community context is complementary to the learning that takes place in the classroom. Parents and other family members appreciate schools which take an interest in their home culture and strive to incorporate this culture into partnership programmes.

Heightened visibility of parents and other significant adults in the school setting conveys a message to students about the importance and value of education, while also communicating the value placed on education by their parents and other adults. This develops the bond between children and parents or guardians, and allows schools to work towards realising the potential of article 42 of the Irish Constitution, which states that 'parents are the prime and natural educators of their children'. In true educational partnerships, schools become aware of the need to design programmes that encourage the participation of significant male adults in the children's lives. Such programmes enable schools, parents and communities to explore their attitudes towards gender-oriented roles and encourage fathers to take ownership of the educational agenda and to become actively involved in the learning process. Fathers, grandfathers and other significant males appreciate opportunities to contribute to their children's learning. When assistance is sought and opportunities are extended many untapped resources and talents begin to surface, resulting in rewarding experiences of participation. Programmes involving sport and outdoor activities are helpful in attracting and encouraging male participation in the life of a school and can result in a supply of volunteer labour for the development and enhancement of school grounds and surroundings.

In the inspiring words of O'Donohue (2003:143), 'there is a secret oxygen with which we unknowingly sustain one another'. In providing partnership opportunities, schools

encourage and enhance the capacity of individuals and communities to 'sustain one another', allowing relationships and friendships to develop and flourish. With these opportunities, a growing realisation of the interdependence of individuals begins to emerge, in which the mutuality of the learning experience is increased. The active participation of parents, teachers and children in partnership activities results in greater respect for one another and empowers parents and children alike as they take ownership of different aspects of projects and programmes.

Opportunities for reflective practice within educational partnerships are hugely beneficial to all, as this allows participants to re-evaluate their role in the educational process, while at the same time helping them to realise the value of working collaboratively. The *process* of partnership offers mutual learning opportunities for schools, families and communities on an ongoing basis. Teachers learn to be more patient, tolerant and supportive towards one another and towards children and families, and families develop a deeper appreciation of the teacher's role in the education process. Tolle (2005:177) asserts that 'knowing the oneness of yourself and the other is true love, true care, true compassion'. Such awareness improves the nature of interactions between parents, children and teachers and enhances capacity to develop authentic relationships. Caring and understanding relationships between students and teachers help to maintain students' engagement with school and with education.

Promoting and developing partnerships makes additional demands on teachers to remain open to new ideas and to embrace new ways of working with families and communities. The informal interactions which occur during sports days, concerts, graduation ceremonies, and so on provide a medium through which parents are inducted into the more formal partnership structures involved in school management and governance. The involvement of parents in the formal structures of schools influences the design of school policy, school operation and decision-making processes and helps schools become the heartbeat of communities.

Question 2: What made the educational partnership process work well?

The characteristics of a well-functioning educational partnership are encapsulated in the definition of partnership as 'a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate' (Pugh and De'Ath, 1989: 68). This definition makes it clear that the quality of relationships amongst participants and stakeholders is central to successful partnership operations. How individual members interact and relate to one another is hugely important in working in partnership, as this is a central determinant in achieving successful outcomes of partnership activities. In this regard, nurturing and modelling politeness and developing an ethos of appreciation and gratitude are important elements in the development of good relationships. Thus, good working relationships are dependent on mutual respect for the thoughts, beliefs, feelings and actions of other participants in partnership activities.

The process of developing educational partnerships provides many valuable opportunities for building positive relationships between parents, teachers, children and the local community. In this regard, teachers are the gatekeepers and hold positions of power in the building of bridges between schools and communities. Teachers, therefore, must see themselves as agents of change and must acknowledge the value of parental participation in the life of the school, while at the same time remaining cognisant of time constraints, family commitments and alternative pressures on parents, and sensitive to family dynamics. Attention must be paid to the sensitivity of language and the use of appropriate terminology in all communication and discussion. In addition, a welcoming ethos in the school contributes greatly to the development of home-school-community partnerships. When teachers welcome and validate parents by listening to their concerns and by communicating positive messages about their children's progress, then parents are more willing to engage in partnership programmes. This type of open communication with parents and other family members promotes a greater sharing of information and a better understanding of each others' perspectives.

True partnerships must promote and support diversity by encouraging the participation of both minority groups - e.g., members of the Traveller community and families of different ethics origin - and majority groups alike. The participation of a

diversity of social groups is best encouraged through open consultation and participation in the planning and design of partnership programmes. Effective consultation with parents and families around the planning and designing of partnership activities promotes the development of more culturally responsive and culturally aware programmes. Allied to this, well-structured programmes and thorough preparation on the part of schools ensure inclusiveness in partnership activities. In addition, the establishment of core groups of dedicated parents promotes enhanced communication throughout the community and contributes greatly to the organisation of large events.

However, methods of encouraging equality of participation can present challenges. Effective methods to address this include the adoption of a non-judgemental approach in relation to all parents and children, while remaining cognisant of the dynamics that exist between different families within communities. O'Donohue (1997:15) states that "if approached in friendship, the unknown, the anonymous, the negative and the threatening gradually yield their secret affinity with us". On the basis of this, we can conclude that awareness is a powerful agent in building relationships and therefore the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills is crucial to maintaining positive friendships, stable families, successful careers, and strong communities.

In this connection, the inculcation of a strong sense of democracy and ownership in all stakeholders in the partnership process is essential for success. The nature of family-school-community partnerships promotes such a sense of democracy and influences school culture in ways that facilitate greater democratic practices in schools. Increased collaboration between schools and other agencies within the community allows for the exchanging of ideas and ultimately gives schools an opportunity to learn from other people's experiences, including the experiences of the children themselves. The inclusion of the voice of the child is important for the success of educational partnership, as children can advise on current contexts and comment on the realities of participation. This in turn creates a deeper sense of ownership of the partnership programmes and allows them to identify more strongly with their school and with the education process.

Question 3: What prevents educational partnership from working well?

Aspects of the prevailing culture in which school systems operate present challenges for the development and promotion of educational partnerships. High-security measures which are required for the health, safety and protection of school staff and students in some school settings are not always conducive to a welcoming atmosphere. High railings and locked doors conflict directly with the open and welcoming atmosphere which is a prerequisite for successful educational partnerships. Equally important is the provision of facilities for parents, such as parent meeting rooms that can cater for large groups of parents and their infant children. The absence of adequate seating and adult toilets are obstacles to ensuring the successful implementation of parent participation in schools. In addition, there exists a need to dispel the notion amongst the community at large that parents are only called to visit a school for negative purposes, e.g., when a child misbehaves. Dispelling such misperceptions is a necessary first step in building family-school-community partnerships which can contribute to children's learning and to shared decision-making processes in school. Schools need to actively promote more inclusive policies by means of the regular dissemination of school newsletters which highlight positive aspects of the life of the school and acknowledge the value of parental support.

A true partnership between families, schools and communities requires that all stakeholders commit themselves to transcending prescribed roles and behaviours. In this regard the issue of homework must be carefully reconsidered. Traditional-style homework, prescribed by the teacher or laid down in the textbooks, continues to be the norm in many households each evening resulting in negative feelings towards education for many families. Homework is a key link between the school and the home and therefore should be used as a mechanism for involving the whole family in improving literacy and numeracy. Homework can and should be a meaningful and enjoyable experience for the entire family. Partnership programmes which encourage family and community participation in intrinsically-motivated activities develop strong bonds between schools and communities and validate family aspirations.

At present, a variety of challenges and barriers seem to impede collaborative approaches to children's education and development. From a parental perspective,

these challenges and barriers include time constraints, family and work commitments, past negative experiences of school and education, lack of resources and lack of communication skills. From a school perspective, these challenges and barriers include insufficient time, insufficient space, added workloads, poor funding, inadequate school facilities, behavioural issues and poor human resources. Consequently, if schools are to realise their potential in terms of nurturing and developing educational partnerships they will need support in finding new ways to connect with parents and community organisations. This may require concerted efforts by teachers working in disadvantaged settings to actively challenge existing power structures which promote the status quo and result in the present educational inequality.

Furthermore, traditional approaches to discipline and to the organisation of time within the school setting do not exhibit the flexibility required for successful partnership programmes. This implies a need for a redefinition of roles and power relationships within current educational practice. Parents must be assisted by schools in playing a more central role in their children's education but it is unlikely that this can be accommodated within the existing time structures and embedded patterns of current education systems. A major cultural shift is required in order to bring parents and teachers more closely together in the task of bringing up children and securing fulfilling lives for future generations. A process of frequent consultation between school and home is a necessary element of successful partnership practices. Such consultation can take the form of incidental meetings or more formal meetings. Flexibility on the part of the teachers and schools is paramount in overcoming consultation difficulties. However, this cannot be accomplished without a significant investment of time and it requires additional supports, resources and sustainable investment. Official policy needs to take cognisance of the fact that cultural changes cannot take place in the absence of due support or in-school structures which enable teachers who are currently pioneering and sustaining partnership practices to continue in this work.

Question 4: What models of partnership were most appropriate for the five participating schools?

As pointed out earlier, this question was largely answered by a review of the relevant literature and by the analysis of the data in relation to questions 1, 2 and 3 above. For this reason, a brief review of the literature on international best practice in relation to educational partnership is presented here to substantiate the conclusions drawn in this study concerning the most appropriate models of partnership for the five participating schools.

The literature illustrates a marked convergence among educational theories towards a process of educational partnership as 'the way forward' in children's education. Advocacy of working in partnership may seem obvious in light of Clarke and Glendenning's (2002: 33) observation that 'like community, 'partnership' is a word of obvious virtue (what sensible person would choose conflict over collaboration)'? Nevertheless, in adopting this model, it is important, particularly in terms of effecting change in school settings, to give due consideration to the most appropriate and effective models of partnership.

Three models of educational partnership were described in the literature section, referring to the works of international authorities in the field, such as Epstein (2001), Westcott Dodd and Konzol (2002) and Barbour *et al.* (1997). The shift within the field of educational theory towards a partnership approach to children's education was common to all three models. It is clear from the discussion of each model that educational thinking is evolving from the earlier view of the separate roles played in children's education by schools, families and communities to a more holistic conception of education as a shared accomplishment. In empodying this shift, the partnership programmes enhanced all stakeholders' understandings of their positions on the continuum, from participating at the 'minimum level' to the 'associative level', to involvement at 'decision-making level' in the partnership process (Barbour *et al.* 1997: 326-327). Epstein (2001: 22) views this continuum in terms of a movement from the 'separate responsibilities of institutions' to the 'shared responsibilities of institutions', and from there to the 'sequential responsibilities of institutions'. She illustrates this movement with the aid of a Venn diagram depicting an *overlap* that can

be increased or decreased, depending on three factors: 'time, experience in families and experience in schools' (Epstein, 2001: 27). Much attention was paid to these considerations in the development and implementation of educational partnership activities in the schools and many instances of good practice in this regard are highlighted in the qualitative data analysis. Various examples of the symbiotic relationships that were an essential part of the FSCEP partnership programmes were evident in the data, recalling Wescott Dodd and Konzol's (2002: 125) 'synergistic model' which emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of families, schools and communities.

While there was a growing awareness in all five schools over the course of the FSCEP project of the benefits of developing educational partnerships, there remained some uncertainty as to what exactly the concept entailed. Although in all five schools a broad consensus prevailed in relation to models of best practice, there was also an acute awareness that a 'one size fits all' approach was not appropriate. The activity programmes of the FSCEP project helped to generate awareness of what models were best suited to each individual school. As a consequence, individual schools became attentive to the 'social and psychological distance between family and school members and their patterns of communication, and the results or outcomes of more or less interactions' (Epstein, 2001: 31). Increased interaction between individuals at the micro level enhanced interaction at the macro level and this was particularly evident during big celebratory events. There were also however, elements which were seen as essential for all models of educational partnership. These were evident from the data and were concisely summed up in the following mnemonic devised by one of the participating schools (CT1):

What did the FSCEP project mean to our school?
F - *the **FUN** we had throughout the various programmes*
S - *the **SOLIDARITY** among all the participants*
C - *the **COMMUNITY** spirit among all who took part in the activities*
E - *the **ENJOYMENT AND EXPERIENCES** we obtained from our involvement*
P - *the diverse range of **PROGRAMMES** that we have delivered*

Partnership programmes evolved in different ways through teachers' understandings of the cultural contexts in which they were working. These programmes were also influenced by the internal cultures of the various schools, each of which had its own unique characteristics. On numerous occasions, the entire school prioritised certain curricular areas over others in designing the partnership programmes. The origins of some partnership activities were often to be found in the areas of interest of members of staff. However, all schools viewed the creative arts as an appropriate and non-threatening medium for the development of partnership activities and the data indicated that arts education was regarded as a fertile area for the development of partnership activities. Activities in this sphere ranged from parent participation in art and craft activities in the classroom, to community-based art projects, to drama activities, to song and dance shows, to puppetry, to the promotion of, and participation in, large-scale cultural events. However, as mentioned previously, arts education can also be used as a means of introducing other curricular areas, such as literacy and numeracy and often acts as a covert mechanism for promoting academic learning. The creativity and intrinsic motivation which are essential elements in such activities were seen as the energy source for driving these activities forward. Consulting children and parents in relation to the nature and design of activities and providing for the sharing of skills and responsibilities was key to the success of these endeavours. Increased parent-teacher interactions led to increased parent participation and this in turn led to increased empowerment of parents. Participation in any form, or at any level, resulted in increased empowerment for participants.

Outdoor activities, such as sporting activities, field trips, exploration excursions and the refurbishment of school surroundings were sources of intrinsic motivation for children. Building in 'discovery-method' approaches to learning excited children's curiosity and ignited their enthusiasm. Outdoor activities and sporting activities had the added advantage across all schools of attracting a greater degree of male participation. Fathers, male guardians, grandfathers, older male siblings and other males in the extended family circle were more willing to participate in such activities than in classroom-based activities. To ensure a true educational partnership, therefore, a policy of positive discrimination in favour of male family members should be put in place, with additional levels of resources and funding.

The development and promotion of educational partnership requires high levels of organisation and attention to detail that make extra demands on teachers' time and energy. Cognisance of parental time-constraints, prior commitments and external pressures influences the design and duration of partnership programmes. Shorter programmes of four to six weeks' duration with one session per week are more successful than longer programmes in attracting parental participation. Other considerations with regard to the most convenient times for parent participation must also be taken into account. Partnership programmes that took place at the beginning or end of the school day were better attended than at other times. Also, classroom activities in confined spaces required careful organisation to ensure smooth operation. Ensuring that no disturbance was caused to other classrooms was also an important consideration. In terms of classroom-based activities, 'Maths for Fun' proved very popular in all schools because these games had a focused structure which ensured orderly participation by large numbers of children and adults in confined classroom situations. Clearly, high levels of flexibility and organisational skills are required by school staffs to allow for successful partnership programmes to take place.

The development and expansion of literacy skills for children was prioritised in all five schools. Shared-reading (sometimes called paired-reading) and other literacy-enhancing activities were regularly promoted in all schools. Literacy-focused activities ranged from individual class activities to large-scale community activities that provided and encouraged opportunities for literacy development throughout the communities. Examples of these are outlined in earlier sections and they include such activities as shared reading in the classrooms and in the homes, the making and using of story-sacks, family 'write-a-book' programmes and family-history projects. Some literacy projects had broader objectives, such as the development of social capital through the promotion of community spirit and civic pride. These included community-led programmes that researched and documented the history and culture of local communities, as well as school-led participation in cultural celebrations at local or citywide level.

The process of working in collaboration with teachers, parents, children and community members ensured that the partnership activity programmes were interesting, appropriate, relevant and exciting. Many of these activities incorporated

fun elements. All adults and children love to laugh and so the fun element of partnership practices is very important and needs to be built in at all stages. Also, the assignment of culturally relevant homework which allowed parents to participate and contribute in a meaningful way made the partnership processes a fun experience and helped to promote positive feelings towards homework and towards education in general.

Such a role challenges teachers to be creative in developing new ways of working with families and with local communities to exploit the potential of educational partnership for the empowerment of local communities. Teachers have a crucial role to play in developing 'parent readiness to participate' in roles such as members of boards of management, special needs assistants, caretakers, tutors in after-school and out-of-school groups and activities, members of parent-teacher associations, members of parents' councils and local education committees. True educational partnerships promote a shared investment by families, schools and communities in the educational process that help all participants to acquire skills, knowledge and confidence to lead full and productive lives.

Conclusion

This study shows that the development of educational partnership practice is attainable and that very positive outcomes may be achieved by working in this way. While drawing attention to the numerous barriers and challenges to this practice the data indicated that effective educational partnership practice brings with it a host of benefits for children, teachers, parents and the community. However, the development of effective educational partnership is not cost-neutral. It demands the investment of time and resources. It challenges the key stakeholders in children's education to reflect on current practices and calls for educators to move out of their established 'comfort zones' and forge new means of communication between families, schools and communities. In embracing this cultural change teacher development must include an in-depth training in an understanding of educational disadvantage and social exclusion. In addition the study challenges educational researchers to explore new teaching and learning methodologies that encompass broader dimensions to the educational process that will help regenerate communities. In this regard, the

purpose, process and nature of children's education remain the essential themes in educational partnership debates. Ultimately, this requires Irish society to reappraise its values, beliefs and sense of its own identity as a nation.

Concluding Remarks

Researching this thesis over the past four years has been a rewarding and exciting experience. It has been a journey of exploration and discovery through which I came in contact with so many people who care about the quality and inclusiveness of their school communities. It was an honour and a privilege to be part of their enthusiastic endeavours in bridging the gap between homes, schools and communities. The limitations of this study are attributable to my own strong convictions concerning the merits of educational partnership. Through involvement in the FSCEP project, I was afforded the opportunity to enhance the learning environments of the five schools by supporting teachers and principals in their work with families and communities. This provided many opportunities to work with parents in developing skills specific to supporting their children's learning. It also provided opportunities to work strategically with local communities and to promote cooperation between the schools and other community organisations. My experiences with the educational partnership programmes were enriching and rewarding. The 'blind spot' arising from these positive experiences leave this research work open to charges of bias and lack of balance. The methodology chapter explained that the schools had volunteered for, and whole-heartedly embraced, the partnership programmes. Hence, the research setting was favourable to positive outcomes. This fact needs to be borne in mind when assessing the conclusions drawn in the study. Nevertheless, this study presents a vision of what true community education could become and as such has much to offer educationalists, policymakers, community development workers and the broader research community.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: FSCEP partnership activity programmes

Literacy and Numeracy

Shared Reading
Infant Home Packs
You, Me and ABC
Science Discovery
Maths for Fun
Maths Games
Intergenerational learning
"Write a Book"
Story Sacks
Treasure Chest
Floor time
Music workshops
Intergenerational Learning
One Book, One Community

Arts Education

Seasonal Art and Crafts
School Shed Murals
Confirmation / Graduation activities
Music/Performance
Music Appreciation/Therapy
Music & Movement workshops
Early Start Group music therapy
Community Arts projects
Crochet
Christmas cake making and baking
Drama & Mime
Exploring Clay
Art Workshops
St. Patrick's Day Parade
Pottery workshops
Christmas Celebrations
Christmas Angels
Excerpts from "Oliver"
Trips to UCH
Puppet Performances
Irish and Set Dancing
Coffee mornings
School Concerts
Drama activities
Holy Communion Art & Music
Card making
Easter musical
Seachtain na Gaeilge
School Garden Development
French cuisine and culture project
"Let's pull together"

Sport

Garden projects
School Garden Development
Outdoor Learning and Field Trips
Football Coaching
Swimming /Water Safety
P.E. for All
Chess and Board games
Pony riding
Hip-hop Dancing
Summer Camps

Appendix 2: Reflective Journal for Teachers

This week's experiences: **DATE:**
My reflections, feelings, observations, comments, suggestions, hopes, fears, challenges, etc. with regard to educational partnership.
MYSELF:
THE FAMILIES:
THE SCHOOL:
THE COMMUNITY:
OTHER COMMENTS: (please continue overleaf if necessary)

FSCEP Questionnaire

	YES	NO
I have been involved in whole-school activities with FSCEP		
I have been involved with activities with my class for FSCEP		

Impact on teachers

	Agree strongly	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Disagree strongly
1 As a teacher in this school, I welcome FSCEP's intervention activities in the school.					
2 The FSCEP activities have helped me to develop a deeper appreciation of educational partnership.					
3 FSCEP has helped me to become more aware of the value of parental involvement.					
4 The FSCEP project has impacted on our school planning and policymaking.					
5 The action-research element in the project was of benefit to me.					
6 The FSCEP project has made little or no difference to the way I work as a teacher.					
7 FSCEP activities brought a new dynamic to our teaching and learning for my class.					
8 The FSCEP project brought an added workload and extra pressure on me as a teacher.					
9 FSCEP raised awareness of *complementary learning* and consequently I offer more interactive homework.					
10 The FSCEP project provided some well-designed, inclusive, and comprehensive approaches to family involvement in children's learning.					
11 The benefits of the project were confined to a small number of teachers in our school.					

Impact on parent involvement

12 The project increased parent involvement in school activities.					
13 Home involvement in children's learning increased because of FSCEP.					
14 The FSCEP activities enhanced parent/teacher relationships with parents.					
15 As a teacher, I welcome increased parent involvement in the life of this school.					

	Agree strongly	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Disagree strongly
16 As a teacher, I want increased parent participation in children's learning.					
17 Only a limited number of parents benefited from the project.					
18 FSCEP increased my interactions with parents and families.					

Impact on pupils

19 FSCEP improved children's engagement with literacy and numeracy.					
20 Children's attendance and behaviour improved because of FSCEP activities.					
21 Better pupil/teacher relationships have resulted from FSCEP activities.					

Impact on Community

22 FSCEP activities raised our school's profile in the community.					
23 FSCEP activities resulted in improved networking with other agencies.					
24 FSCEP helped our school become a learning centre for adults as well as children.					

Additional Comments:

Thank you; your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

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Appendix 4: Interview Template for Parents

Icebreakers. Introductions. Chat. Explanation. Permission to record.
Aim : to capture the experiences of parents and to gain an understanding of their perspectives and insights on educational partnership.

General conversation (Recorder on)
-What do you think this project is all about? What is being asked of you?

1. Experiences
- What kind of things did you do?
- What did you enjoy most? Why?
- What did you enjoy least? Why?
- What opportunities have you had prior to this of being involved in the school?
- How would you describe your relationship with the school up to now?

2. Learning Points
- How did you feel during the sessions?
- What do you think of the way the sessions were run?
- What did you gain or learn from the experience?
- Who gained most from the sessions? Children? Teachers? Parents? Why?
- How do you, as a parent/guardian, see your role in educational partnership?

3. Expectations (of projects and of school in general)
- How did you feel coming in to the first session? Why?
- What were you hoping to get out of it?
- Is it something you would like to see continue? And in what way? Why?
- How can the role of parents/guardians be developed further?
- What are your hopes for your children in their primary school years?
- Has your relationships with your children changed in any way because of this?

4. Strengths and Challenges of Educational Partnership
- What are the advantages of parents and teachers working closely together?
- What makes it easy? What makes it hard?
- Talk to me about 'home-learning' versus 'school-learning'
- What would you regard as 'important learning' for children?
- How do you see the role of parents in their children's learning?
- How can parents and teachers work well together in the interest of children?

5. Communications
- What are the kinds of things your children tell you about their day at school?
- In what ways are your discussions different now from what they were before?
- Have communications between school and home changed in any way?
- Have communications or relationships with other parents changed in any way?

5. Way Forward (for projects and for schools)
- What else would you like to see happening in the projects?
- Anything different, anything new? (If you were planning)
- Any changes schools might put in place to make things better?
- What helps / stops parents from coming along?
- How to get other family members involved? Grandparents? Older siblings?
- Any other ways that parents / family members might like to be involved?

Appendix 5: Interview Template for Children

Ice-breaker
Introductions
Would you like to tell me about yourself / your family?

General conversation
What's school like? Tell me about the good bits and the bad bits.
Favourite subjects? Favourite pastimes?
What would you like to do when you're grown up?

Experiences (with the projects)
1. What kind of things did you do?
2. What did you enjoy most /least? Why?
3. Do you do any of these things at home?
4. What do you think about learning with your parents and other adults?
5. What do you think of the way lots of people helped out in the classroom?
6. Did your parents get to know you better? Did you get to know them better? In what way ?

Attitudes
1. Where, do you think, does the most important learning take place?
2. Is 'home learning' different from 'school learning'?
3. Do you see your parents as 'teachers'?
4. What do you think of seeing your parents in the school?
5. What do you think of seeing your parents helping out in the classroom?
6. What do you think of seeing your parents talking to the teachers?
7. Do you think you could talk to your teachers if you have a problem?

Way forward
1. What other sort of projects would you like to see happening in school?
2. What other ways could parents and teachers work closely together?
3. In what ways could other family members (grandparents etc.) become involved?
4. Are there any changes schools might put in place to make things better?
5. Do your parents talk about their own days in school?
6. What is it like to have parents admiring your work in the classroom?

Appendix 6: Interview Template for Teachers

Greetings / Icebreaker / Setting the Scene. Permission to record.
Aim: To capture the experiences of participating teachers and to gain an understanding of their perspectives and insights into the partnership process.

Experiences and Learning Points (See list of activities)

- Could you give me a brief summary of the activity programme or programmes you were involved in?
- How did you feel about working in this way?
- What were the learning points for you? What worked well? Anything you would do differently?
- What have been the outcomes for you as a teacher of these activities?
- What do you think were the outcomes for the pupils, the parents, the school?
- In what ways, if any, did FSCEP activities promote new teaching methodologies?
- Will you use these methodologies in the future? If so / If not – Why?

Critical Reflection

- How do you feel about the research element of the project, i.e. compiling the reflective journal, action researching, doing interviews, etc?
- How do you see the role of parents in educational partnership?
- How do you think schools, in general, are judged? By parents? By pupils?
- In your opinion, what do parents regard as the most important qualities of a good teacher?

Student Commitment

- How would you define 'student commitment'?
- Do you think families shape the commitment of children to school? If so how?
- Do relationships with teachers affect student commitment? If so how?
- Do you think teacher attitudes/practices influence student commitment? How?
- Do you think teacher-parent relationships affect students? If so, how?
- In your opinion, what effect does 'high visibility' of partnership have on students?

Collaboration and Power Sharing

- What are the advantages of working in partnership?
- What are the challenges of working in partnership (with staff, parents, MIC?)
- What changes might schools put in place to facilitate partnership?
- What one single change would you like to see in your school?
- What advice would you give to other schools who are interested in this approach?
- Have you got any innovative / alternative ideas for the way forward in educational partnership?